

Higher Powers

N.A. Hole

All rights reserved.

ISBN-10- 9798302212610

Copyright © 2025 by David Miller

Sodomite Media Corporation, New York, NY

Chapter One: Falling Branches

I.

A giant black centipede tracked across a concrete wall in Leviticus Tate's cell.

"Ask yourself what you would want me to do if you were him," Tate said to FBI Agent Beatrice Ng. Then he quickly took a life. He had no intention of being merciful or even indifferent towards the creature.

Constrained as he was by iron bars, Levi felt a visual aid was necessary to prove a point.

He was explaining to Beatrice that life was cheap. But, also, something more. There was some subtle notion swimming just beneath the surface of Levi's tough guy palaver. According to it, life was not so much cheap as infinitely protean. Life was extinguished, or self-extinguished, routinely. In the extinguishing life was affirmed. Eventually it reappeared in strange ways. It was a fire in the sun, hidden in plain sight. It was of God, holy yet wholly expendable. Which made it simultaneously worthless and profound to Levi Tate.

"It's better to be a philosopher than an accountant," was one of Levi's favorite sayings, echoing Nietzsche. Actually, it was better to be neither. As only truly violent men were capable of deep thought. Every intellectual discipline led to the

fitting of a yoke and blinders on that discipline's practitioners. A man could only think clearly, therefore, apart from the domain knowledge upon which both philosophy and accounting were dependent. Courage was required to self-liberate, but erudition of any sort engendered self-examination (which was the mother was of fear). Tate was being ironic when he said philosophy was superior to accountancy. He meant that a simple indexing of assets was at odds with truth finding. But he didn't believe in truth at all.

He liked to fuck with people just to fuck with them. Contra all the FBI profiling, he didn't have a real ax to grind with the world. He liked people well enough. He liked them in the manner that he liked a scurrying centipede across his death row cell. Their torture and destruction provided him a moderately satisfying diversion. This was in between the experience of nothingness that his perception defaulted to when not entertained. Truth be told, Tate thought death would be a relief when it finally came. Death was supremely exciting when viewed from the outside. Unlike life, it was a kingdom from which boredom was exiled. It didn't have so many highs but, then again, there was the absence of lows. It would come eventually. And then he would see for himself. He was motivated, however, to delay dying as long as possible. The fact that so many unwashed masses wanted him dead was motivation enough for Levi to stay alive indefinitely.

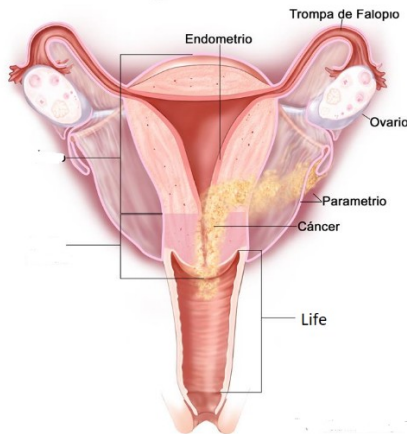
Hard in the grave his opportunities for terrorizing others would be severely limited. He wanted to get his licks in before it was too late. He understood the FBI's patience to be limited concerning his perpetuation. His first execution date had already come and gone. He understood that eventually the feds would grow tired of him being. This was regardless of whatever legal obligation they had to

the families of his victims. They wanted him dead more than they wanted closure for the next of kin. They were waiting for the right moment to declare that this was so.

Killing him would be a joy for them. In this, they were so much like him. Leviticus Tate understood that his murder would be interpreted as a triumph over decadent liberalism's basest impulses. Governments were generally too self-interested to glean the irony in their actions. Tate thought it was a public service to alert them to the irony. He wanted to impart a moral lesson. He wanted to cull the herd as best as he could before being forced into leg irons and a black hood. Humanity was infinitely vulgar to him, infinitely absurd. He thought it would be best for all men to die together.

According to Levi, you wanted to be a philosopher more than an accountant because at heart all philosophy was a lie. Rows of null values leading to a meaningless total was the best that could be spoken of concerning God's creations. There was nothing to people for the most part. The average human being contained two dollars ninety-five cents worth of physical material in his or her corpus. It wouldn't even buy a cup of coffee at Starbucks nowadays. The soul, being non-existent, was worth nada. Zilch. In his avocation as a serial killer, Tate had killed over three hundred people, using many methods. With bank maintenance fees, he figured he owed God a thousand bucks. At one of his many trials, he had communicated this value loudly. They could take it out of the amount they confiscated from his bank account upon his first conviction. They could pawn off the guns and machetes and knives and IEDs recovered from his workspaces on various sweeps over the past twenty years. He had plenty of economic prospects. He was a Kardashian-level celebrity. Surely as a memento

even one of his blood-soaked M2s could bring five times that amount. He was motherfucking famous, a true American legend. Rappers namedropped him and pontificators pontificated on how a creature like him could ever have been produced in an allegedly healthy culture. They all wondered of Leviticus: what was the source of his power? Nuns sent drenched panties by parcel post asking for his John Hancock on them. In reply he had a single word for them. The word, friends, was *cunt*. Go ahead, dive in. This was Tate's motto. The Good Earth would receive all eventually. There has never been a single thought formed that was not a lie:



Tate had a high self-opinion owing to him being able elude detection for the first twenty years of his killing career. And, also, because he was a raging narcissist. He required constant reinforcement of his genius. Without his games and back and forth with the FBI he was just another death row convict. He needed the feds as much as they needed him. He was constantly threatening to clam up on them but didn't mean it. In truth, in their presence, he was in his glory. The worst thing they could do to him was to ignore him and treat him like every other psychopath they had encountered. That would be

worse than hanging. A living death in every respect was the worst of both worlds.

Thus, his strategy was to court the feds even as he was messing with their minds. He wanted them outraged but intrigued. In truth, he needn't have worried that they would weary of him. Various members of the Bureau were over the moon with him by this point. There were so many promotions riding on his revelations. He could spend the entirety of these meetings throwing feces at them through the bars and they wouldn't have abandoned him. They saw him as the John the Revelator of murder porn.

Agent Beatrice Ng was staring at Levi with one foot crossed over the other. She seemed fascinated by him but was possessed of an implacable quality that argued against any real depth of passion. With him she was like Jane Goodall surmising an especially precocious chimp at Gombi. She understood the apparition in front of her as remarkable, but she seemed rooted in her own dispassion. She was afraid of him but didn't seem to be. She was somewhere on the autistic spectrum due to her unique origin. She felt emotions were misplaced regarding other people. She realized she was being invited by Levi to react emotionally to his performance. Eventually she would give *him* a show. She had been directed by her immediate superior, Peter Plan, to engage. He had wanted to keep Levi talking. But it took real effort for Bea to produce even a forced charm. It had nothing to do with the company in front of her. Even in front of Mister Rogers, Agent Ng would be cold and distant. She lacked the ability to project the facts of her inner life onto the actions of another. She had no idea what other people were thinking from one moment to the next.

She was, however, being queried.

"If I were him...or it," Beatrice Ng said to Tate wondering if the centipedes even had a gender, "I suppose I would be dead now. And, therefore, the exercise would be irrelevant."

Levi Tate looked up from the concrete floor.

"Pardon me?" he said.

"Being dead," Beatrice Ng said. "It's a state of non-existence. So, you can't ask what it would be like to be dead. To *be* non-existent. It's a contradiction in terms. Death is a state where you are *not* something. Nothing to contemplate. And really..."

"Yes?" Levi Tate asked her, leaning forward on the iron frame of his jail cell bed.

"It's something most people don't think about. What would they do if they were dead. Better to ask a chair what it would be like to be alive. You'd get the same profundity in the response, I'd wager. Something close to silence but not quite. There are some questions that are unanswerable. That's all. A chair is not a living thing nor a living thing a chair. There's not a handle on the idea to grab onto. Non-existence. It's not an object it's a concept. It doesn't make sense to contemplate it at all."

Levi Tate had cigarettes in his cell. He had won these from the screws for good behavior. He lit one then sat back down on the iron cot.

"When's Agent Plan coming back?" he asked her.

"Do you miss him?" she said.

"That's something that you shouldn't ask me," he told her quietly. "My emotional connection to others isn't an easy subject. It's a dark topic truly. Something that can not be put into words."

Bea Ng said, "I asked you if you missed him."

"I heard you," he said to her, and lay down on the cot. "But the fact is you're here to befriend. Not taunt or tease. Hardly to psychoanalyze. You're here

to be a shoulder to cry on, to reassure a condemned man past the point of offering false promises. But when you ask me if I miss Peter Plan, Agent, you're being too forward and challenging. It's something you don't know and probably can't learn. Even as I just told you about it. You lack the software to handle the error apparently. You've made a mistake and aren't aware of it. But up to the moment I choose to end your life I will offer you correction for your bad manners. Least I can do really, with one of God's lesser children. I think deep down you're a good person or at least think you are. So, it's the least I can do really for a person who up to this point has given me no cause to hate her. Not just yet."

Outside the hallway window somebody was screaming obscenities in Russian. A maypole was being unfurled in the courtyard beyond. These events were unrelated.

Only a goddamned fool would think otherwise.

II.

In Peter Plan's Washington office, there was a framed copy of the Zimmermann Telegram dangling from the western wall.

"One of the most important unknown documents in American history, and the intelligence community's finest hour," Plan, a drip without a pot underneath him, would say to whoever happened to ask him about the rows of four- and five-digit numbers printed on yellowing paper.

Because that was the point of him having the Telegram mounted, Peter would always explain.

"It's a German communication from the German foreign secretary in World War One," he'd tell whoever, after carefully walking back around to his desk. It was a choreographed display. He needed to pretend that he wasn't so interested in explaining it

so he created a choreographed display. He would check his email while he was holding forth on the Zimmerman Telegram. Sometimes he would just stare at his blank screen if he was on the way out and didn't care to see what was in his inbox.

The Telegram was from Germany. It was intended for the Mexican president, proposing a military alliance with Germany.

"Mexico would invade New Mexico so as to keep the U.S. out of the Great War," Peter would say. "And when the Germans won as a result they would fight for Mexico. They would reclaim the whole shooting match of Greater Mexico from Texas to California. That's what Mexico wanted after all," Peter Plan said. "Well into the 20th Century Mexico saw America as an occupying power. They wanted to get even with the gringo. And maybe they still do."

The Zimmerman Telegram was a conversation starter. But more to the point it was an opportunity to wax ecstatic about the importance of federal police power in the modern state.

"It was British Intelligence who intercepted the cable and decoded it," Peter would always say at his point in the display. He'd rise from his desk and walk over to the framed telegram. "They're the ones who revealed the plans to the Wilson Administration. And, if they hadn't, who knows how different history could be? We'd be eating wiener schnitzel for lunch. Or a burrito."

Peter's visitor was a higher-up of uncertain rank who had introduced himself yesterday. Peter didn't know what the stranger did or to what cases he was assigned. He had strange dead eyes whose whites were receded into his skull like twin balloons bereft of air. His name Peter suddenly recalled was Sane. Phil Sane.

During their first meeting, Peter asked Phil Sane what he wanted to be called. Phillip, or Phil? Instead of answering directly Phil asked after the location of the lavatory. He claimed the question he had just been asked had acted as a diuretic. He claimed he was a sharp knife ready to cut through the dross of a spiritually limiting bureaucracy.

On this day, Director (if that's what he was) Sane had shown up in Peter's office unannounced. He engaged in small talk for exactly ten seconds. Then he asked him about the doings in Kansas. Specifically, about the Leviticus Tate case. Not so much about the timeline—what indictments were imminent and which cases had hit a wall, for example. No, Sane was mostly interested in the spiritual environment in which the investigation was being promulgated. He was hard after the contours of Agent Plan's dreams. He wanted to know about any waking visions Peter was having. He wanted to know about the presence of any corrupted angel. He wanted to know what the senior agent had seen along these lines.

Corrupted angels possessed the oily black wings of bats rather than gossamer feathers. They bore the downcast expressions of ordinary men rather than the smooth, featureless visages of the redeemed.

Phil Sane's concern with Agent Plan, bluntly stated, was that he was not the right man for the job. He saw Plan as somebody perhaps too addicted to FBI mythos to be able to detect the seams in the case's surface. He saw him as somebody whose tendency was to perceive things the way they should be rather than the way they were.

"Remember *Alice in Wonderland*," Sane said to Peter briefly closing his reptilian eyelids. He didn't blink like a normal person. His eye closing was more like a window blind being drawn down on two fat

people fucking. Most were grateful to receive the respite from the vision. But, then again, there was something grotesquely interesting going on beyond the fatty lids.

In *Alice in Wonderland*, he said, Alice vanished down a rabbit hole in search of a talking rabbit. But it was not the rabbit so much as Alice's curiosity about that drove her forward onto adventure.

"She was able to recognize an extraordinary situation when it occurred," the Director said to Peter Plan of Alice. "She didn't, for example, ascribe the vision of a harried hare to a moment's lack of salt on the brain. She consumed the madness that the world offered her as if it was the rarest of caviars. That's how people break through. A once in a lifetime offer, you might say. Alice didn't equivocate," he said. "What she assumed as real was simply what she perceived as real. She was not invested in a particular world view. And for this she is the greatest hero we have."

Staring at or maybe through a drab government wall, Phil Sane collected himself before continuing.

"I see you as the type who would be dismissive of miracles," he told Peter. "I could be wrong, but such is my initial impression of you. You would look at a talking rabbit, for example, and simply stroll past. Or at best wonder about its strange diction. And if perchance it was not here in this country illegally."

In fact, each of Phil Sane's eyes were autonomous parasitic beings that could at a moment's notice leap from its socket and scurry across the floor.

"I realize a sense of wonderment is not required for a man in your position," he said to Plan. "On the other hand, failure should never be rationalized as a misalignment of duties. You've taken on a case in which a deep imagination is required. It has nothing

to do with decoded telegrams or the known past. You could fail at it and never be aware that this is so. It is too late, however, for a reassignment," he said. "And even if it weren't, I suppose, we both must wrestle with the vague concept of fate. I realize at some level you always were meant to take this burden on. And your failure will be our failure. And also our success."

Hearing of Director Sane's doubts in his abilities, Agent Plan was about to protest.

"I speak to you in this way only because of the situation's urgency," Sane said. "I fear all will be lost if you fail."

Plan was unaware of the context surrounding the last statement.

"Sir?" he said.

"By that I mean we will have lost the ability to distinguish waking life from a dream. That which is wrong will go wrong on its own. And we will not so much as be able to recall our best friend's name."

By the time he left the room several of the numbers on the coded telegram had transposed. Presently what Germany was communicating to Mexico was their desire to negotiate a *surrender* between them and the Allies. Of late they had gained the upper hand in the War to End All Wars seemingly. Merely, Germany now wanted a third neutral party to step in and negotiate a truce. They were asking to meet somewhere in the Canary Islands. They wanted Mexico to see to the details.

All of this happened far faster than an ordinary mind could perceive it. And somebody like Plan, with his rigid mindset, and moral absolutism would have been adamant in his defense of reality regardless.

He didn't believe in the Many-Worlds Interpretation and the mere anarchy that it loosed upon the world. Peter genuinely thought God loved

him as he loved his Only Son. So, he was having none of it. There was one truth as there was one God. He would look at these telegram numbers constantly, commit them to memory and not recall a discrepancy.

He thought one was certifiable to think anything but this.

III.

Nowadays Beatrice Ng slept above the covers, face up, with hands placed at her sides palm down and big toes touching each other like contact points in a circuit.

"I find it alters my dreamscape," Beatrice said describing to Peter Plan how this position evolved years. "The fetal position, I found, only encourages dreams about my early youth. I found sleeping on my stomach even inadvertently causes me to dream that I am dead and in a spectral form."

In the "flat board" position as she called it, Bea dreamed of absolutely nothing. Yet, she dreamed. But in the dream, she was of nothing, surrounded by nothing utterly. There were no perturbations in the blankness if she maintained her rigid stance. It was entirely up to her to maintain it while unconscious. This was no mean feat. It took her many years to master the effect. She might have been better off studying with some yogi who could teach her directly. But she was headstrong and dismissive of authority. She felt she was better off making her own way herself.

She desired to experience a dream state devoid of both image and feeling, she told Agent Plan. This was when she was prompted about her interior life. She said this because she felt she was otherwise falling apart emotionally. She didn't know what emotions were, but she felt they were being leeched

from her person regardless. She assumed they were there for a reason. She supposed that she was diminished once they were flown from her.

"It's too much sometimes. This job for one thing, but mostly other people," Bea said to Plan with only a slight amount of prompting. Minutes before, she had picked Peter up from the municipal airport in Garden City, Kansas. They needed something to talk about on the boring drive over to the supermax prison. So, this was what she chose. Her emotional fragility. She wanted to set the parameters for conversation early on with Peter. She wanted to talk about herself because this was the subject that supposedly she knew best.

Comfortably on the spectrum, Bea was a prisoner of her own dry consciousness. Her mind was a supermax cell of its own replete with a TV feed to the outside. She knew what was going on outside, but she was always "inside" regardless of the intensity of whatever external stimulus had been nearby. Every word she spoke was tainted by self-knowledge. She was a voyeur unto her own duplicitous dealings with the world. She would never admit that she was merely listening, never speaking. Even when she spoke, she listened. There were many things Bea needed to get off her chest. But somehow when she tried the words always failed her, circling around each other then attacking each other. Leaving corpses of ideas in its wake.

This might confirm that she had nothing to say. But silence was difficult to put into words. She had always looked to others for guidance. She lacked what primitive people called a soul.

She was brain-damaged, she felt, and expressed her distress many times to many an unsympathetic neurologist.

In fact, Bea Ng was a tulpa, an emanation body of the early twentieth century, created and

maintained by the famous Lady Margaret Wallington, adventuress of North Umbria.

(For the purposes of this narrative the distinctions between tulpa, high-functioning Asperger's victim, and zombie were irrelevant. Therefore, they will not be spoken of again. Merely it should be said that Beatrice Ng was not the damned soul she sometimes made herself out to be. She was confused merely about her origins. She was distant from reality principally because she was not of it. It was a simple explanation but one which she would likely reject upon discovering. She realized what she was at some level but was in denial about it. Nobody wanted to be told they were a lesser form of life. She considered herself fully human. In fact, despite her psychological problems, she considered herself something of a human role model. She was contemplative and measured while other people were short and frequently terrified. And most of all she was completely unafraid. At all times. Evil made no impression on her.

Nowadays in her dreams she floated in nothingness for an uncertain time.

"In the void—which is what I call it," she said to Peter Plan, "time is meaningless. Because, you see, time is a measurement of the proximity between physical events. In the void you're unaware of so much. You only become aware when time starts to move once more. So, you can think about one thing for a thousand years. And all these answers start to come to you that otherwise would have been elusive."

According to Bea, this strategy was effective as therapy. Also, it worked as a basic crime solving technique.

"You wait a thousand years and the dots start to connect themselves," Bea said to Peter Plan and executed a hard left. The road to this Kansas

supermax where Levi Tate was sequestered was unpaved and unmarked. It blended into the featureless landscape as surely as Bea's consciousness in the Void. It made it seem almost as if the road was part of the map of consciousness not a member of America's highway network. Which one supposed was the way the government had intended it.

Agent Plan, who had been out here only once, was momentarily stunned as to the prison road's ragged appearance.

"What happens if there's a Code Black declared," he asked her. "And various support personnel are required? Probably in winter this road's impassable to non-specialized vehicles. What happens if there's a guard down and the helicopters can't fly in bad weather? You ask me, agent, they haven't thought this facility's logistics through as thoroughly as they might. They're sitting ducks but they don't know it. The isolation is their enemy."

According to Beatrice, all prison personnel carried around a CIA-style cyanide capsule on a neck chain. There was no evacuation plan at this supermax because there were no evacuations allowed. Given an uprising, they would fight and win or fight and die. This had been made clear to them before they were extended a job offer. They knew to a man what they were getting into. They must have thought it an adventure of some sort like in a Tom Clancy novel.

This was no ordinary supermax, in other words. It was black as night. Even the governor of Kansas had no knowledge about its workings.

"Except for the crows," Beatrice told him, "you and I are the only outsiders who have stepped foot in there for years. That's why you shouldn't react so adversely any dirty look you are given. They think we're acting as federal oversight. They don't care

about cold cases. They think the FBI is picking a fight over jurisdiction. But to the best of my knowledge, this is not the case.”

Briefly Peter Plan consulted his encrypted iPhone on which sat some of the cold case files Levi Tate claimed knowledge about.

“Not that it matters so much to me, agent,” Peter said, “But who runs this prison anyway? I know it’s not the FBP.”

“No, sir,” Bea said. “Definitely not. It’s not the FBP.”

“Who then? I heard the Department of Justice itself. In a separate program. But it couldn’t be...”

“It’s a Pentagon program as far as I know,” Bea said.

“Really?” said Peter Plan. “It’s a military program? Under the Judge Advocate General?”

“Not military,” Ng said. “*The Pentagon*, I said. I don’t believe the office in question has a title. Or if it has a title it requires top secret clearance to speak of it. That’s all I know. I traced the funding as far as my clearance allows. Somewhere in the Pentagon’s inner ring. After that, it disappears. Like, well- “

“Yes, agent?” Peter Plan said.

“Like Alice down the rabbit hole,” Beatrice Ng said.

“Sure,” Peter said and dropped his phone as a pothole was encountered. Lord knew if he was aware of this reference. From his perspective it likely didn’t matter.

IV.

In this supermax, unnamed as likely befitted its mysterious nature, each cell was isolated from the other by eighteen inches of reinforced concrete with

quarter inch thick steel plates on either side that effectively cut off acoustic communication of any kind amongst inmates.

"They blindfold prisoners on the way in, so they are not allowed to form a mental map of the layout," Levi Tate said nonchalantly to Peter Plan when asked by him, in a misguided attempt at an icebreaker, how this joint compared to all others he had been warehoused in. "Of course," he said, "they perform this as a security measure so that prisoners are not aware about what they're up against vis-à-vis escape. They don't understand that it has exactly the opposite effect," he said. "They don't realize that the less a man knows about a given situation the more curious he is. In this instance, the world becomes a blank slate upon which anything can be written. As mass murderers are generally not known to be timid. They don't look at a blank spot on a map and think *Here Be Dragons*."

Somewhat bothered by the leg irons the screws had outfitted him in for this interview, Tate shifted in the bolted down chair he had been placed in. The irons were connected to the floor bolts allowing him limited movement.

The chair in turn was inside a six by six-foot exterior cage that stood at the entrance of each cell. Once Tate was back in his cell, the screws would enter the cage and remove the chair using hazmat gloves. While doing so they had been given careful instructions not to stare through the small Plexiglass window into the cell door. Levi Tate was rumored to be in possession of hypnotic powers. Their instructions had been to stare at the floor constantly. It didn't matter if it made removing the bolts more difficult, these were their instructions. Somehow the FBI was going to be billed for all this overhead relating to security. The supermax's warden, Stiltz, didn't see why such face-to-face

contact was necessary. His idea had been to stick a camera and mike in Tate's cell. He didn't see why his people would have to put themselves in harm's way for what he saw as an irrelevant investigation.

Dead was dead, was it not?

On the several conference calls Stiltz and Peter Plan were on together the warden drove this point home to Bureau higher-ups. Which was to say, Tate's execution would (or at least should) act as a blanket judgment for all unsolved murders. It didn't matter in Stiltz' view if Tate had actually committed a given crime, as it would be ascribed to him posthumously. He saw this as the most efficient way to proceed. The cost for all these multi-state investigations would be through the roof. Also, Tate was clearly in the midst of pulling something. He was incapable of acting out of anything but self-interest, according to Stiltz. He had no concern for his victims' families certainly. He certainly had no true concept of justice.

The Warden was a bottom-line oriented individual. And, like all administrators at this place, a Gulf War veteran.

"None of your motherfucking business," Stiltz had told Agent Plan when during the twenty second meeting that morning, Plan asked after the location of Stiltz' right arm. It was none of Peter's business, but he asked anyway. He felt it best to get under Stiltz' skin as quickly as possible. He wanted to make a new enemy as enemies were generally more reliable than friends. He felt the need to be grounded prior to meeting with Tate. He wanted to make an enemy of Stiltz because he required a reliable set of responses from him.

Interviewing Levi Tate was like going to war. As in war, there was an unpredictable quality to the proceedings. This was Peter's desire to bring Stiltz into the fold. He wanted an enemy rather than a

friend because it was easier to make an enemy than a friend. He wanted to be able to anticipate Stiltz' responses. People who hated your guts were easy to read because true hatred possessed a monomaniacal quality. It was comforting for Peter to be amongst enemies. There was no guess work involved in their responses.

Stiltz understood Agent Plan as an interloper at best. At worst, he was a defiler of this temple of justice. He had the gas pellet for Levi Tate's execution already picked out as if it was a Halloween pumpkin. But its deployment might take years until the investigation of all the cold cases was complete. How could people be so stupid as to not see the game that Tate was playing? All through his appeals process, Tate had been waiting to play this card. He had been scheduled to die within seventy-two hours. But a stay hadn't even been issued. It wouldn't be issued until Agent Plan could offer a timetable as to the cold cases' resolution.

Tate through the auspices of his lawyers had sworn to provide a comprehensive set of confessions accompanied by specific coordinates as to where the bodies (or at least several of their parts) of specific missing persons might be found. Blessed with total recall supposedly, Levi Tate could provide this information. According to him, he remembered with supreme clarity murders that stretched back decades. He could tell you where he picked up the scent, the length of time the hunt had taken, the method of their demise (he was, unlike other serial killers, utterly utilitarian in this aspect), and, most importantly for Agent Plan, the location of their internment. Tate had a number in his head concerning how many dead there were. His lawyers had argued it was for him to know and the FBI to find out. It was a Fifth Amendment issue, according to them. Which, given the context, was absurd.

Likely they didn't want the Bureau reneging on the deal early as they approached the stated number. From their cold case research within Tate's periods of activity, Agents Plan and Ng had derived a number between eleven and fourteen. Based on this range, Agent Plan was confident that the field work Tate would be a party to would conclude within three weeks. This was the time frame he had sold to the Bureau. Three weeks. Within ninety-six hours of the case's conclusion, Tate would be executed. They all agreed it was too anguishing to have the investigation stretch on for years to incorporate multiple new trials.

This accelerated timetable should have mollified Warden Stiltz. But he was having none of it.

"You don't know who the fuck you're dealing with obviously," Stiltz said to all parties concerned during one conference call. "I mean, here is a man who bends reality," he said referring to Levi. "The longer you keep him alive, the greater the odds are that he'll never die. And when I say never die, I mean fucking never! Look, you haven't spent time with him like I have," he said to Plan, sounding desperate for only a second. "I mean, we've come this far and we're about to blow the whole thing. You don't realize that you're being played. You don't realize that just because he's locked up don't make him unfree. In his mind, it don't make him unfree. There's something he has planned. For us all. You're not worried about that, but you should be," the Warden said. "Because once outside the prison's control, it's your asses that'll be in his crosshairs. And likely when it happens, you'll be somewhere nobody can help you. It's all part of the plan. His plan. And now that you've been warned that's all the help that I can give. Which judging by your attitude isn't nearly enough."

Warden Stiltz was a large black man with a gun fetish. And these two attributes when combined tended to discourage any sympathetic reading concerning one of his outbursts. People heard him yelling and felt threatened. Especially when they were in his office with him. That was where he kept several of his semi-autos mounted on the wall like a hundred-pound sturgeon.

Peter Plan resolved to ignore the warden completely. He had a job to do regardless of the danger Stiltz detected. It wasn't his investigation anyway. He was just a worker. He wouldn't have stopped taking to Tate even if he agreed with Stiltz.

"We understand and will take every precaution with him necessary," Peter had said on that call. In reality, he had turned a page. He had made a mental note that Stiltz was more of an impediment than asset and moved on. He thought he had the upper hand in the relationship. He thought Stiltz knew that this was so and was only talking just to talk.

Before Levi was secured in the external cage, Agent Plan briefly felt that Warden Stiltz had been right about everything.

"I think we're at the outset of performing a redemptive act, you and I," he said to Tate who was staring forward unblinking with hands delicately on his lap.

Immediately Agent Plan regretted saying this. He had been attempting to get on Levi's good side, but now, deep in his presence, it was obvious he had no good side. Chained to the chair, Tate was calm and non-committal as a patient just before surgery. He seemed to appraise each statement Plan made without offering one of his own. He was neither sullen nor sociable but profoundly aware. In the same way as the family dog immediately became aware when seeing a squirrel in its

backyard. His eyes never left the center of Peter Plan's face. This was not ordinary attentiveness but evidence of a predatory obsession. He had no intention of letting Peter win even at the outset. Even if it was in his self-interest to do so. He was malign to the core was the reason why. He was proud that he was a malign to the core. He was proud of all the evil things he had done and those evil things of which he was still capable. He wanted to advertise the fact. He wanted to engender nightmares in all those he encountered. He claimed himself as a dark wizard of the fourth realm in unguarded moments. He didn't believe in strategic withdrawal. Except in the direst of circumstances.

He saw Agent Plan's Adam's Apple bob up and down like a buoy in rough waters and smiled.

"Sometimes it's hard to say exactly what you mean," he told him. He sat back slightly. He had been so still up until this point that when he did so the agents flinched. To them, it appeared as a violent action. As if in his presence they had fallen asleep and were not even now fully awake.

He told the agents a story about a horse that had gone blind and was struggling to find its way home.

"Eventually a butcher found him," he said, "and tied him in shop's back alley. He threw hay down underneath him and fed him oats from his pantry. Up until the moment that he took the cleaver to him, the horse wasn't the wiser. The back alley might as well have been his old home. But he didn't know so he couldn't act. His ignorance allowed black magic to take him. It was magical in that the cleaver's intercession into the horse's neck was extra-logical. To the horse, that is," Levi said. "So, in a sense, the horse was the magician and the butcher the bewitched. We create our own theories about what is true. The universe, agent, is silent

about them all. There's no gainsaying a man who believes he can fly and move objects with his mind."

Usually this was the sort of digression that set Agent Plan's teeth on edge, especially during an interrogation. For some reason, in this instance, he simply sat there and absorbed it. Perhaps he thought it was a preamble to the voicing of valuable information like a body's location. More likely, he realized Tate held all the cards. One look at Tate told you he was unafraid to die. He was obviously playing a game with them. And there was nothing to be done except to play along.

By now they still hadn't discussed a single case. Peter had no intention of offending Levi in any way.

Rather than ask Levi for a summation of all the unsolved murders he had committed, Agent Plan was, at least for the moment, content to hunt and peck.

"We have three cases here we'd like you to take a look at," he said to him, sliding three manilla folders underneath the exterior cage's bar with a croupier's paddle, "and see if they ring a bell."

When they arrived at Levi's chair, he momentarily hesitated.

"I thought we were going to talk a little more first," he said.

"What was it you wanted to talk about?" Peter Plan said.

"Maybe something to do with psychology," Levi told him. "I mean, not so much the who and the what but the why? That is, what notion gets into a man's mind to make him act out violent fantasies? Just like you, Agent, I live in a world of darkness and light. But how does the notion arrive to act on the worst impulse one has? You must have given it some thought regarding these cases. Put yourself in my shoes and you'll make certain discoveries. Think about what led me to be in this place. Think about

why even now I wouldn't have stopped even if I knew I'd wind up in here."

He was speaking in a convivial way. Which belied his words' seriousness.

"What if anything," he asked Peter, "would you do if you knew they would kill you for it later? If your answer is nothing, think about how this could be. You may consider yourself absent of self-interest. But, on the other hand, there's nothing worth dying for. Is there? You make up a situation and follow through. See if it's true that for you the only thing that matters is staying alive."

Slowly Tate averted his eyes from Peter's. He looked down at the case files. He picked the first one off the pile.

"Shall we get started?"

V.

Carol Ann Rodman was nineteen at the time of her disappearance. She was studying nursing at a community college in southern Indiana.

Immediately Tate put the folder down.

"Nursing," he said to Plan. "What kind of nursing?"

Peter had been fumbling with his phone all this time searching for the voice recorder.

"That's irrelevant," he told Tate.

"Not to me it isn't," Levi said.

Beatrice Ng slid her chair forward.

"The first gate is passed," she told him, "When you say with definitiveness if you killed her."

He looked down at the case file again.

"*Born with a cleft palate that stood in need of correcting*, it says here," Levi said. "But, in fact, it was more than this. She had a slew of defects resultant from Pierre Robin Syndrome and a mother who drank. Fourteen surgeries in fact from age nine

months to age seventeen. Her church had taken out a perpetual collection in her name. And she was in constant pain because of it. And self-conscious about her looks."

Levi Tate closed the folder and slid it back underneath the external cage door.

"She would tell me all about it, occasionally," he said to them. "She would speak about it on those occasions that I allowed her to speak. She would express her longing for transformation. To be another person or another creature, free from deformity. Her theory was that God had intended her to suffer. She had been born a monster and the doctors had turned her into something else. Something lesser. She wanted to be changed back, she told me. She said that they had no right to change her body against her and perhaps God's expressed desire."

Peter Plan's recorder was working now, and he felt deeply happy that this was so.

"How did it end with her?" he asked Tate. "What did the final scene entail?"

Levi rocked in the chair in the millimeter or so that its retractable bolts allowed.

"She wanted to be changed," he told Peter. "So, I changed her."

According to Tate, there was an apple tree on an abandoned property in Vincennes, Indiana that kept a silent vigil over Carol Ann Rodman's bones.

"I remember it because of its knotted branches and the fragrance its fruit provided once it fell to the ground and began to rot," he said to Peter. "I was digging at night," he said, "over several days. And then there was the house itself which was identical to the one Agnes Moorehead haunted in *The Magnificent Ambersons*. The windows were blinded with plywood, so I ripped one off and looked inside. In the hallway is a double staircase just like in the

movie. And I distinctly recall somebody's portrait hanging in the hall."

To Levi Tate, who had a master's degree in film studies from UC Berkeley, this was an obvious comparison. Indeed, he would constantly compare himself and his exploits to various movie characters. Mostly Westerns. He was in these Westerns always cast as the good guy. He was always doing folks favors. He was Hank Fonda in *My Darling Clementine*. As if a kind of angel, a soldier of Christ, fallen through the void forever to the dirty earth.

This was what Leviticus had to say about his murderous exploits at the occasion of his first death penalty sentencing: *Sooner or later you'll all have to see that the angel of death is truly the only benign figure in the celestial rank. All the rest are otherwise needy, vain, or mere homunculi. So why a servant of death like me should be treated with such disrespect, it's unclear. We can go on and on, judge, about who "deserved it." The truth of the matter is we all deserve it. We all are stalks of wheat awaiting the planter's scythe. There is no shame in it. Just as there's nothing obscene to murder.*

The judge was shocked at Levi's positive assessment of his deeds and cut him off before he could finish. This was grounds for an appeal by itself and bought Tate another six months of life. He had meant every word he said and was indifferent to the successful legal challenge. His appellate lawyers were anti-death penalty zealots and had long ago stopped honoring his wishes. Tate had his own dark reasons for retaining them. He was up to something. But it was a fool's errand to ask him what it was.

As per their agreement, he would not delve into details about how or even if he had killed Carol. That was for the FBI to decode once they got their hands on a particular missing person's remains. Peter Plan had agreed to this stipulation, reasoning

that the FBI forensics lab was so accomplished that they would be able to ascertain time, place, and manner of a victim's demise as accurately as Levi could remember. They would take all this data, coupled with the fact that Tate had led them to the bodies to begin with, and push for a summary judgment against him. He wasn't going to dispute the fact that he killed any of them, just not admit that he had. He might have found the admission of guilt a denigrating act. To him it would be like admitting that he was in the wrong. And per his statement years before he certainly didn't see this was the case.

"If you go there, to Vincennes," he said to Agent Plan, "you need to be sure to stop off at the Lonely-Hearts Café. They do a mean double cheeseburger and a cherry phosphate. Then there is a jukebox that you might be interested in as well. Very unusual selection on that jukebox," he said. "Some of the selections even dyed-in-the-wool roots music connoisseurs might not be familiar with. They got all of Harry Smith's old 78's on there. And a particular Blind Lemon Jefferson jig that even Lemon himself wouldn't precisely remember the words to if he could be polled for an answer:"

*Black snake is 'ceitful, crawlin' all
in my bed/
I say, black snake deceitful,
crawlin' all in my bed/
I had a dream last night, black
snake had killed my baby dead*

*Hey, hey, mama, black snake's
lyin' all in my hall/
Hey, mama, black snake is all in
my hall/*

*And if you quit me, mama, you
can't see that black snake at all*

The agreement they had was that Tate would supply information to a particular body's location and the FBI would go and retrieve it. But it seemed impossible that someone even as poised as Tate could remember the exact location of bodies that he had disposed of decades back. Eventually he would need to be transported to these places he mentioned for a memory jog. Agent Plan had a number in mind about how many false leads Tate was allowed before he called the whole thing off. But he had already dreaded the time when it came to transport him somewhere. Warden Stiltz was sure to do everything in his power to stop it. He might simply refuse to open the doors and tell Plan to summon appropriate federal forces to get him to do so.

They would need to bring in a cadre of agents fresh out of Langley. They would need to brandish weapons likely against prison guards. And that would only be on the first occasion.

Agent Plan paused his tape recorder and picked up the folder.

"OK that's one down," he said to Tate. "What about the other two?"

As if forgetting the folders were there, Tate upended them with the links in his leg irons. "Don't want to overwork your prize racehorse," he told Plan staring at Bea. "Besides, the other two aren't mine."

Peter Plan said, "You know this how?"

"Call it a paternal instinct if you want, agent."

"No," Plan said. "I call it psychopathic bullshit."

Leviticus Tate smiled.

"I would doubt that grievously, sir."

"Yeah?"

"Because the other two 'cases,'" he made air quotes, "as you know are plants. By you. Placebos, if you want to trivialize this exercise even further. You wanted to test my veracity straight off to avoid unnecessary excursions into the hinterlands. So, you constructed a controlled experiment. If only to blackmail me later once evidence of my duplicity was revealed."

In fact, the second case in the pile was of a murder in Jackson, Mississippi in 2004. The killer had already been caught, convicted, and executed. The third file was entirely fictitious, a scenario involving death by bludgeoning out in Oregon that Agent Plan's wife, a crime novel junkie, had helped him construct two days before flying out here.

"The plan backfires once it's revealed, agent," Levi Tate told him. "Now it seems I have the upper hand in our negotiations. You can try it again but it's unwise. Because you will surely be blamed now for anything that goes wrong. You'll be accused not incorrectly of time wasting. And you'll have Micah Stiltz to deal with."

Peter wanted to know how exactly how Levi Tate found this out.

"Do you know what a tell is?" Levi asked Peter.

Peter Plan, a once and future poker player, said that he did.

According to Levi Tate, there were physical tells such as pulling on one's shirt collar when one was bluffing. There were also *spiritual* tells, he told him.

"Insight comes to he who kills enough to be able to fully distinguish life from death," Levi said. "The Third Eye opens invariably, roused by the excitations, mental and physical, that killing entails. Over time you come to detect the universe's lone secret. Which is that there is a single real object, a lone field of energy of which we all partake. You are distinct from me, agent, only in your ignorance of

what you are. You believe there is an impenetrable wall between your body and mind. It is not so. You believe that which is inside cannot get outside unless you will it. And vice-versa. You will come to know the truth eventually. You will see the meaningless of secrets and an interior life. The dreamer in the dream will become self-aware and attack and kill his creator. It's a common phenomenon. But until that happens, you're better off putting away the tricks of the trade. If only that you have a reputation to uphold with your colleagues. You don't want to be seen as not overseeing the investigation properly. You don't want to go to Washington and face the Man with No Eyes devoid of either tangible results or even a basic explanation about what happened."

Having said his piece, Levi slowly withdrew into a shadow that seemed to have bloomed spontaneously just over the chair's back.

Peter Plan turned to Beatrice Ng.

"Anything to add to this?" he asked her.

In Bea's pocket was a yellow photo of Lady Margaret Wallington of North Umbria. The photo was from 1927, where she is seen in monks' robes in the famous monastery at Buryatia. In the photo she stares into the camera as if self-aware of who is watching. She seems prepared at any moment to nod her head yes.

VI.

The quickest way to Vincennes, Indiana from Garden City, Kansas was to fly into St. Louis and rent a car. For some reason inexplicable to both Bea and Peter, they found themselves flying into Indianapolis on a G3 and waiting for a prop plane connector out to Knox County Municipal Airport.

Thus, it was three in the morning before they found themselves in town, punchy from lack of sleep and absent of the police escort that they had been promised. Claiming overtime issues, the local cops hadn't stuck around the airport parking lot and left only a single text to Beatrice's phone communication. Apparently, there were bridges that would need to be built with local authorities despite the case's high profile. Through a sleepy veil Agent Plan lamented that this was so. He thought Phil Sane's office would have been out front in this. He thought immediately after he had put in the call to Washington, they would have put in the call to the Vincennes Chief of Police describing the importance of the investigation.

It still could happen. On the other hand, Peter was starting to think that he was the only law enforcement official, Ng included, emotionally invested in this investigation.

"When we find the crime scene," he said to her, "our first recourse is to start digging. If the property's abandoned, we don't have to worry about the obtaining of warrants. Anybody complains we'll claim probable cause. We'll claim we saw a white rabbit with a bad attitude disappear down a hole and simply gave pursuit."

In the rental's driver seat Beatrice Ng turned toward him. "White rabbit?" she said. "Is that a new code?"

"In a way, agent, it is," Peter Plan said. "And I'm just now learning to decipher it."

They parked in a Pilot Flying J a half mile down the airport road and had an impromptu meeting.

"Best course of action is to find the center of town and proceed in a series of outward spirals," he said holding up a Vincennes roadmap that he had bought inside the truck stop.

"He said the movie house, abandoned, which I'm assuming is ornate..."

"Got it right here, boss," Beatrice said holding up her iPhone. The image from IMDB showed a spooky mansion of nineteenth century vintage replete a gothic spire and a wrap-around porch.

"Well," Peter said, when he got an eyeful, "it's distinctive all right. Hopefully it wasn't torn down. I mean something like that, that structure," he said pointing to the phone's screen, "I mean, I wouldn't want to live there even for a month or so, even on a dare."

"It's haunted you're saying?"

"No, not haunted. I'm saying it's a dead place. For dying people. Look, it's built like a church almost. It's built to intimidate, to broadcast wealth and power. There's a not a cozy nook in the house."

Whoever owned it, its original builder likely, wanted to lord it over his neighbors. It might have been right along the river on a bluff so that the ordinary folk of Vincennes could get a good look at it.

This would have been a detail Levi Tate surely would have recalled. But just because he didn't say it didn't mean it wasn't recalled. Plan never expected any more than half truths from him. He thought the longer this went on the more selective his memory would become.

When he killed Carol Rodman and disposed of her body in some indeterminate way he was executing the very last part of an extensive plan.

"He said he talked to her before he did her in," Beatrice Ng said, staring at the spiral Peter had sketched on the map. "He claimed he had some sort of relationship with her prior to her demise."

"It's all bullshit with him," Peter Plan told her. "I mean, this is textbook psychopathic manipulativeness. You're supposed to ask what sort

of relationship. And then he'll feed you just enough information about it to distract you. It's a sort of spell he's intending to cast. He wants you down on your knees in front of him," Peter said. "That's the whole reason he's cooperating. He wants to set himself up as some sort of guru of the damned. Anything he says could be true or not true. The trick is not to reach for anything with him. You ask questions and he provides information. Everything else you should consider a false lead," he said. "Everything else is just designed to make you crazy and keep you up at night."

He told Bea that they could begin to ask questions regarding a victim's demise only after the body was exhumed.

"We need to trust the forensics behind it," he told Bea, sipping his harsh coffee. "We need to adopt the position that everything Tate says is suspect. Whereas everything the body tells us is unimpeachable. You listen to Tate only as much as it get you to the body. He could confess to the crime outright and he still shouldn't be believed. Wait until the forensics comes back and then reach a conclusion."

Before Agent Plan had begun to denigrate his testimony, Agent Ng was about to speculate about the nature of Tate's relationship with Carol Rodman. Perhaps they actually had some sort of relationship and were together days or weeks before her demise. If so, her body's recovery could act as a Rosetta Stone enabling the translation of the bloody pictogram that Levi's timeline had formed itself into starting around 1983. Presently there were too many loose ends to account for. Some of the murders he had been convicted for had seemed to have been committed by other people. But physical evidence had been found in Tate's storage locker and he had confessed to the crimes. They had him

for so many other murders anyway at that point. His confession simply alleviated the duty on the part of police to investigate the crimes further.

Surely this was what Tate wanted. Ever since she had been assigned to this case, Agent Ng had wondered why. She suspected there were confederates of Tate's still at large that he was protecting. She suspected that at least one of the cold case files they were investigating would reveal that this was so.

We need to trust the forensics behind it, Peter Plan had just told her. But even Bea Ng, a dream made flesh, was instinctive enough to doubt that Peter would. When the path ahead led into shadow, Bea assumed Peter would abandon any semblance of scientific rigor. He was above everything a company man. He wanted good results for the Bureau. Which certainly did not entail revealing their misadministration of justice. He might reject the obvious conclusions consciously or unconsciously, but he would reject them. She had identified a fragility in him that made this betrayal of the truth inevitable. She thought he couldn't help it even if he was made aware of this weakness. He was wired this way. And Levi Tate likely knew this as well.

In the film version of *The Magnificent Ambersons*, George Minafer walked the streets of a newly industrialized city, dazed by the modern society that has grown up around him.

"Everything here seems broken," Peter said once daylight came to downtown Vincennes. He was commenting on various boarded up storefronts and a single street so filled with garbage that prudence dictated that he place the rented Buick in reverse to find a parallel route. Surely this could not be the effect of Levi Tate's habitation here so many decades back. Despite this realization, Agent Plan

was having a hard time trying to separate the two. He was experiencing the sort of tunnel vision familiar to him while working a troubling case when every piece of sense data received seemed like an important clue.

Indeed, Vincennes was no different than any other small to medium sized town in the Midwest whose economic viability had been ripped apart by global forces. There was a John Deere factory somewhere on the outskirts, for example, that relocated to Mexico in 1994. The jobs left but the people remained. Tate's arrival in this city around the same time was completely coincidental. Only a paranoid fool would have thought different. He wasn't any sort of plague-carrier. He wasn't one of the Four Horsemen *Revelation* described so eloquently riding down from a black cloud to actualize the end of the world.

On a downtown street corner that was notable only for the lack of street signs sat the Lonely Hearts Café.

"Cute like something out of a movie," Peter said, noting the misshaped heart pulsing over its entrance in neon. "But the fact that he mentioned it at all to me means it's a waste of time. Maybe we should come back after we've poked around?"

Bea Ng agreed with Peter that this was another of Tate's red herrings. She agreed that he had mentioned it only to distract. She said that it was wise to come back to it. Or maybe better yet she could inspect the café and its fantastic jukebox by herself. She would per Levi's reminiscence be looking for a particular song.

This was entirely acceptable to Agent Plan.

"Even for a psychopathic mass murderer," he said to Bea, "I find his company disagreeable. I didn't know what I expected going in exactly, but I've encountered something worse. He gives me the

creeps truth be told," he told Bea. "And that's you know me, agent: I always understand in advance what I am getting into."

When Tate was finally dead, when the prison doc had signed the death certificate and he had watched him being laid to rest, Peter Plan would revisit Vincennes and drive around. If everything looked suddenly splendid, he supposed he would have to start attending church again on Sundays. He prayed every now and again by himself. But when doing so he felt he was simply reciting a particular set of phrases from memory. He supposed that return trip would change his life. He supposed in the manner of all quests he would need to take it alone. And while completely sober. He would rent a room for four days and look around. He might start talking to people to ask after their experiences.

The house that Tate had described was encountered in the form of a sketch on a placard in an assisted living facility a mile from downtown.

"Oh yes, they named the facility after it in 2000," the chatty receptionist told the agents when they had stopped inside to inquire. "*Falling Branches*. That's what they called the house when people lived there," she said to them. "It was a landmark and people didn't want it torn down. So, this is what happened: they named the facility after it. *The Falling Branches Rehabilitation Facility of Vincennes*. Supposedly they used a cornerstone of the mansion in the facility's foundation. Just to get the historical society off their backs. They didn't want to make it seem that they were paving over anything. It's a Canadian conglomerate that owned this place. They didn't want to get in a shooting match with the local yokels for no real reason."

She said that if the agents had wanted to look around the grounds they would be more than welcome to...at least during the day.

"We got nothing to hide when the sun's still shining," she told them. "I leave at four every day. But at night, at night things go a little haywire around here. So, I'm told."

This was obviously a setup line and both Plan and Ng took the bait.

"Ghosts, I'm told," she said to them. "The place's as haunted as an Indian burial ground built over another Indian burial ground built over the mouth of hell. Which was why pretty much they leave the patients on their own recognizance when the lights go out. And they lock the doors behind them when they leave."

Lucky for them Agent Plan was wearing a crucifix under his dress shirt. It could at a moment be brandished like a handgun against a supernatural foe. Legend had it that this symbol worked against vampires as opposed to ghosts. But surely it was better than nothing. Somehow, Peter had foreseen this eventuality and was trying to protect himself. Somehow, he believed the secondhand testimony that Fallen Branches was haunted. He didn't need proof. He thought it was self-evident in a way. He thought it would have been extraordinary if there hadn't been a ghost on site.

The apple tree that Levi recalled burying Carol under was in the smack dab center of a courtyard around which various wheelchairs were being pushed in the manner of demonic children dancing around a maypole.

"Best take along a pair of work boots next time," Peter Plan told Bea once he finished unloading the shovels they had bought at Home Depot on the way over. Those flats she was wearing were as good as nothing when indulging in excavating. Agent Plan had no intention of obtaining a court order and a backhoe. He figured a shallow grave was a shallow grave. And he also figured that once a piece of

heavy machinery rolled in a search warrant would be necessary. With just a pair of shovels at the ready they could legitimately claim to be engaged in casual observation. If they hadn't found anything in an hour, they could simply replace the spoils and pretend as if nothing untoward had occurred.

The problem with digging around a fruit-bearing tree was that its root system tended to reside only a few inches below the topsoil.

"It's like hacking through a steel spider web," Plan said to Agent Ng, who was sitting this one out for lack of proper footgear. He hadn't figured on this. He figured one or two pits of a depth of twenty-four inches or so would have been an hour's work at most. He thought at that point at the very least he would find a bone in the spoils. Maybe he would find nothing and then he would have his answer, too. But given the equipment he brought with him this was turning into an all-day affair. He needed an auger specially designed for the clearing of roots. He had no idea if such a device even existed. But the longer he stayed the greater the chances he and Ng would be chased away. He had already sweated through his dress shirt. And there were one or two roots already encountered that even his spade's pointed tip couldn't penetrate after three or four sharp blows struck.

Having the new shovel come up dented after an encounter with an especially tough shoot convinced Plan that they should reconnoiter to the local courthouse and get themselves a warrant.

"I mean, it's not going anywhere," he said to Ng, meaning the tree itself rather than Carol Ann Rodman's remains. He had been strangely overeager to get down to business. He usually was the soul of self-control at least while on the job. He had a slight drinking problem that he ascribed to his high stress profession and his troubled adult son.

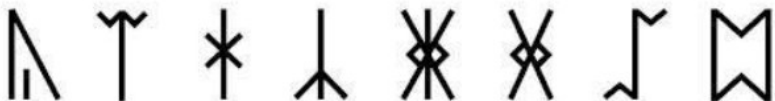
But while on the job he never so much as tipped. He had bought into the mystique of the FBI long ago. So much so he didn't even consider it a mystique. He thought there was unalloyed good in the world and the Bureau had full access to its manna. But, for some reason, beyond the lack of sleep and Levi Tate's mind tricks, he found himself cutting corners. None of this was worth it finally. He needed to prepare himself for the realization that it was all a false lead.

He handed Agent Ng his shovel and walked into the nursing home to find a lavatory. He was covered with dirt, and he wanted as best he could to clean himself prior to facing a judge. It was the only prudent course of action short of finding a hotel, getting some rest, and changing clothes there. The tree's crown as viewed from the building's inside revealed itself as a gnarled face with a single great arm stretching out from the trunk as if an Old Testament prophet indicating the path to Canaan. Strange that Tate had omitted the detail. But he had visited in the dark and decades back. Even he was fallible. He had gaps in memory and forgot relevant information due to old age or lack of interest.

Once finding the public john, a private closet, Agent Plan commenced his grooming using wads of paper towels and the lukewarm water that the spigot afforded regardless of which water source he tapped.

"I'm almost done," he said to the knocking inquisitor on the other side of the closet door. He assumed it was Agent Ng.

From under the door a piece of paper appeared. It was covered with strange symbols that to Peter's Plan's untortured eyed look like Celtic runes:



Underneath these symbols was a bit of creaky handwriting that to judge by the shiny ink looked to have just been written:

I know what happened to Carol Ann! I seen it myself! I helped with the body's ascendancy unto the Higher Realm!!

When Peter opened the door, the small patient standing there seemed too doty to be aware of his nakedness.

Agent Plan said to him, "Did you write this note?"

"This note?" the patient said pointing to his heart and dropped to his bony knees in front of him. Four seconds later he was dead. No one was there to mourn for him. His next of kin had abandoned him. Orderlies threw him in a body bag and carted him off. And then as if to mark the occasion an apple fell from the tree outside onto an immaculate lawn rife with worms down below.

Chapter Two: Come Forth!

I.

Now, Lazarus of Bethany lay on a stone slab for three days. Until on the fourth day the Lord of the Universe, Jesus Christ, called him back to life.

"Lazarus, come forth," Jesus said in a loud voice and Lazarus stirred. Then the beautiful cool darkness that he had been luxuriating in had been infiltrated with shafts of discordant light.

But what could he do? The Lord had called to Lazarus from outside the tomb and slowly, as if compelled only by the minor guilt that an unwanted favor engendered in a man, he rose. His first thought was that he had done something wrong. But in his former life Jesus had called him friend. Jesus had asked Lazarus once for shelter and shelter had been granted. He didn't understand what else was required of him. He had thought he had done enough to at least earn his rest.

As per Jewish custom, after death he had been wrapped from head to toe in a winding sheet. Yet somehow when the Lord called to him again, he began to walk from the tomb. He had no idea about what waited him on the door's other side. He had no idea why he had been roused from a sleep so profound a trillion years would pass in an instant

absent of any disturbance and no notion of gratitude would be needed.

When Lazarus emerged into the day's violent light, his sisters, Mary and Martha, ran to him.

"The Son of God has spared you from eternal darkness!" Mary said, but not to Lazarus. On a hillock just above their house the Lord of the Universe stood with his arms held out to embrace a hidden other. He had placed one foot just below the other to maintain balance. He had no face to speak of.

Which was to say, he had a face but a certain obfuscating structure, perhaps a halo of diffuse light or a swarm of insects, tended to remove his features from ordinary perception. As should have been the case with such an exalted being.

According to Martha, Jesus had wept before mounting the hillock and demanding the stone be rolled away.

"He was overcome with compassion for your demise," Martha said to Lazarus, once alone with him in the house's antechamber. The winding sheet had long since been removed and thrown into a fire the Bethany elders had demanded be built on the village's periphery. Fearful at the miracle they had just witnessed, they wanted to dispose of all things related to the grave. This included Lazarus himself. But in the presence of a Greater Being, they were disinclined to do so. They were terrified at the power presently on display. They would not raise a hand to a favorite of the great sorcerer Jesus. He who had come soon departed with his disciples. He departed quickly enough that many of the villagers recalled it as a dream by the next morning. But here he was again, as it were, in the flesh. Here was a being who couldn't die. He was great because of His Power. And the Jews of Bethany were shameful because they were weak.

According to Martha, and through his dark veil Jesus said, *I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me will live, even though he dies; and whoever lives and believes in me will never die.*

But Lazarus had believed, and he had died, and lay dead. And then he was resurrected.

"He came to you and took you aside," Martha said to Lazarus. "He led you aside and began to whisper in your ear. He told you certain things about him. He told you why you of all men had been spared."

This was hours later, once the winding sheet had been cut from his sweaty body. Jesus and his disciples had remained at Bethany for reasons unknown. Perhaps they had a plan that involved the village. Perhaps they had nowhere better to go.

A feast had been hastily planned in honor of the Resurrection.

"If you wish to know sister, I will recount," Lazarus told Martha. "But realize how blessed is ignorance. The First Man's lone sin was eating from the Tree of Knowledge. And for this we are all damned for eternity."

The lamb they were feasting on was the paschal lamb intended for sacrifice at the Temple in Jerusalem. They would, Lazarus, Martha, and Mary now travel to the temple without a lamb to sacrifice. Different from all others, they would have blinders on their eyes made from the dried hair of a swine's underbelly and paint on the exterior whose shape mimicked a downcast eye. This too the Lord had revealed to Lazarus, but later, when he was preparing the lamb for slaughter.

"Jesus told me all things would be known by the time we departed Jerusalem," Lazarus said to Martha sucking on a lamb bone. "He told me that in Jerusalem He would die on the cross. As a result, the world would be redeemed."

He stared into space briefly and formulated a thought that was choking his mind. "No, not die," he said. "Because He let it be known that there was no death for Him or anybody else. He said he would be transformed. As we all will be transformed by the forgiveness His sacrifice has wrought," he said. "This is known by Him, and it will be known by all men for all time after His departure. He said he will be here always in all our hearts. He told me that I have been brought back to set this chain of events into motion. Eventually Jesus will be arrested and tried. He will be forced to mount the cross as a common criminal. Then the nails will be plunged into His body. And then the cross will be raised, and He will be left for dead."

All this was made known to Lazarus by the uttering of a single word that spawned a single vision. This was when he was searching for the jugular of the paschal lamb on its right side.

"As for what he whispered to me in that morning I have no comprehension," he told Martha and looked at her honestly. "More like a song Jesus communicated than any ordinary speech. It was a humming that bloomed in my mind like pasture flowers after a heavy rain. Not so much words as intonations. These intonations became shapes and then images. And then after several seconds I found myself back where I was and couldn't recall the meaning."

Martha looked at Lazarus with concern. "Is there nothing you can recall of the Son of God's intimations to you?" she said. He was revealing perhaps the span of His plans for us all. Or you by yourself at least. And now like a drunken fool you have forgotten it.

Lazarus of Bethany shook his head. "I have not forgotten, woman," he said to her.

"No?" she asked him.

“Merely, I was not intended to remember. Perhaps someday it will be willed that I recall it as if in a dream. But on this occasion the Lord spoke only to plant seeds, not to harvest fruit,” he said.

Somehow, he knew what he didn’t know. But he was satisfied that the seeds planted in his mind would grow over time. The Lord did not lie, could not lie, as His Word was Truth. Lazarus would live his life such that it was until he was called to do otherwise. He should not be surprised if the command that thundered in his head eventually would direct him back to the grave. He thought it would be a fitting end for him. And he believed it would be a gift from a merciful God unto a wretch so in need of mercy. He had lived enough of his second life to find it distasteful in the extreme. Peaceful in the grave, he had forgotten about the disgusting processes of the body. He had forgotten about what it felt like to lie in bed covered in a sheen of sweat and wait futilely for the mercy of sleep. Animals with their dull minds were superior to men in their ability to bear the burden of life elegantly. They did not want for knowledge. They seemed incapable of dread or outrage. When a man died, he became the simplest of animals, content to graze and be grazed upon. It was a true ascendancy, if not to heaven at least beyond the indecencies of the earth. Thus, Lazarus had come to see his resurrection as a punishment. He had sinned against the Lord, and he knew not why. His second life had been given so that he could find out why. From there, he could offer atonement forthwith.

On several occasions he had merely mumbled the prayer of atonement on Yom Kippur then dined on dried beans throughout a day that the Holy Book designated as a day of fasting. He thought himself absolved of sin in this regard somehow. Even in the presence of the Roman *centuria* who would march

into their village from Jerusalem three times a year to oversee the collecting of tribute to the Emperor Augustus, he was otherwise perfectly observant. The *centuria* would drag the statues of their false religion with them across the Judean hills and expect villagers to bow down to them. But in such times, Lazarus would take up an olivewood cane and mimic the bearing of a man whose knees had been wracked with arthritis. No scrimping in front of a lewd (to Jewish eyes) Apollo, imperious and silent in his marble prison. With head down, Lazarus would lay his coins on the hook-nosed publican's desk and remove himself from the village square quickly. He would not even wait for the receipt to be handed to him. He thought they would do with him what they would regardless. Roman law was an offense to every observant Jew. It should be honored only to the degree that one was able to stay alive another month while one was under it. It should be subverted at every opportunity when one's life was not in immediate danger.

Jesus had spoken of his crucifixion as if it had already occurred. He gave no reason why He would allow it to occur. He could with a word defeat Rome utterly. For reasons known only to Him, he would not do so. He seemed to be on Rome's side almost. He was the Light of Canaan but would allow himself to be killed. Lazarus had thought it had nothing to do with the here and now. He thought there was a hidden plan God had for them all. He thought that the Moses of Deuteronomy was as unhelpful as negotiating the present moment as a recipe for dried fish.

He thought if he was being singled out for punishment he would face his tortures in a dignified way. Such had been the lesson of the Book of Job, hadn't it? Job was not so patient as he was diffident, seemingly loath to complain of injustices rendered

against him. His silence in the face of misery seemed to Lazarus a fitting response directed at He who called the misery into Being. As pain was involuntary, realize. But despair was always a willful act.

He slept not at all on that first night. And by the second day he found himself in a semi-conscious stupor in the shadow of a pine tree staring up at an angry mob. Mathew of Samaria was amongst them, pressing the flat end of a shepherd's crook into Lazarus' chest.

"Why have you returned, *minim*," Mathew wanted to know. "For what purpose are you still in Bethany?"

Ever since returning, Lazarus' hands had been red and swollen. Perhaps he had been allergic to life.

Using them now as shields against the sun made his swollen hands appear to him as if they belonged to somebody else.

He said the reason for his return was unknown to him. Except perhaps as a demonstration that the God of Israel, Jehovah, had unlimited power. And even Death when compared to Him is nothing.

Mathew pressed down with the crook.

"Do you believe that, *minim*," he said to him. "Or is this more play acting, mumbled at the discretion of your master?"

Immediately Lazarus pushed the crook away.

"Master?" he asked the mob.

"The Galilean magician," Mathew said. "Is he not the one who you hold most dear? Has he not promised to reveal his secrets to you upon the granting of lucre from superstitious villagers?"

In fact, Lazarus had, prior to this latest return, been in Jesus' presence exactly once.

"He is not my master," Lazarus told him. "In that He is master of the world. He does not look upon me

as an apprentice," Lazarus said. "As to do so would suppose that I could one day supplant him. But as has been foretold, God will have but a single son. And I am certainly not Him."

Somebody from the crowd threw a rock at Lazarus. This prompted him to stand.

"If you have questions for the Son of God," Lazarus told them, "I suggest you seek him out to pose them face to face."

Mathew of Samaria said, "The points of Roman swords are very much still pointy. Where are the plowshares we were promised?"

Lazarus told them Jesus was headed for the Temple at *Pesach*. "You can ask Him anything you want once there," he said. "For myself I have no questions for Him. He has already answered the one I asked."

"You asked Him why you were returned," Mathew said.

"I asked him what mercy would you have for the world that is as wicked as this one."

"And, Lazarus, what was his answer?"

"He said *no mercy at all* and turned away from me. This was in a dream vision I was granted. A moment later I was back with the paschal lamb. But this was the question I believe he had always intended for me to ask. He wanted to provide the answer to me then as I provide to you now. What mercy have you for a world as wicked as this one? *No mercy at all*. Jesus turned his back to me in an instant and was gone."

II.

Days later the Lord of the World bled and died on the cross. His body was taken down then interred. And three days after that He was resurrected with a flash of light. Nothing of Him

save the shroud He had been wrapped in remained. And no message unto his twelve disciples was delivered concerning further actions for consecutive weeks on end.

On the seventh week came the feast of Pentecost wherein the holy spirit descended.

"Volentes me occidere, mea est salvator meus in sempiternum," declared the Apostle Peter as the spirit took him and dropped him on all fours like a dog. Peter stuck his ass in the air and pressed his forehead to the ground with arms spread wide. He rolled his eyes up in his head and drooled and began to howl. He was sick with the love of Christ. Mad with the Spirit almost. He would not know for the longest while what happened. He had spontaneously tried to leap from the second story window. The power of the Lord was burrowed in him like a tick into skin.

He opened his mouth wide to scream. But instead, only the previously foreign language of Latin came out. Together with a strange gothic-sounding argot that had not been heard on the planet before:

*The Devil is my savior/Praise him eternally!
One day we'll live on the moon/then we'll piss on the
whole earth below...*

To those assembled at the feast this was the tongue of angels. They had no idea what he was saying. Given the circumstances they assumed it was something exultant which in a way it was. Peter was closest to the Christ when His Body was alive. They prized his words over all others even when they were resultant from a temporary madness.

(In the moon by the way, in the constant shadow of its highest mountain, Jesus Christ and His faithful slave Simeon Stylites dwelt in a log cabin equipped

in life support systems. They had a plan to return to the earth in 2031 just when all hope was lost. Even now they were working on an entrance that befitted the Lord of the Universe.)

“Water then wine for our rebbe,” one of the Sons of Zebedee said to those assembled once sense returned to Peter in stages. He was still writhing on the gathering house’s floor. He needed some sort of succor just then or at least a thorough poultice of leeches to calm his nerves. Every so often, unknown English words would come in bits and starts like hairballs from a cat. Several attendees feared he was on the verge of death. He had a similar expression to a strychnine swallower. He seemed to have no self-control left:

*You are our toys with rags for
bones/You exist for our pleasure alone
You are not of angels/more of
apes and maggots*

When he finally recovered, a notion amongst the Pentecostals that they were chosen by Christ took root. The Lord had not abandoned them as they might have once thought. They now knew they were called to some divine purpose. They realized themselves as the elect and this was a far improvement over what they imagined themselves to be so many weeks after witnessing the crucifixion from up close.

They wanted to outlive the memory of God’s death while at the same time basking in the memory of the Pentecost and the gift of tongues. On many occasions while alive Jesus had told them to evangelize so this was what they set out to do. They began to roam the lands surrounding the eastern Mediterranean in search of converts. Every so often they would recall the moment of their possession and wonder if they were on the right path. Why

would Jesus not speak to them directly rather than through them using the tongues of angels? They were disturbed by the English that came forth from them. That tongue sounded different than all the other bouts of glossolalia. To their ears it sounded nefarious. As if something had wandered deep into the speaker's throat and was trying to make it out. It sounded designed to communicate diabolic intentions. There were individual words that they could understand. This made it sound to them like the language of some Gothic tribe. They could not infer a true purpose for it. They could not see why it was being employed by God for this essential purpose. It was clearly no angel that had formed any of those words.

A week after the feast was complete, the apostle Andrew headed east over the Mount of Olives into the village of Bethany.

"My brother, I am here for you," Andrew said to a particularly bedraggled Lazarus who he found in a grove burying yet another stillborn child. His sister Mary was a midwife, and this abomination was the fruits of her labors for a given night. The fetus's head was contracted into its body as if a water pouch that had sprung a leak. Its head was pointy and shimmering like the entrance to the Baths of Agrippa in Rome. Its eyes were overlarge compared to the structure it sat in, misplaced and perpetually open owing to the lack of eyelids.

It gave off a unique smell even while in a pit and covered with a film of odor-masking dirt. In short, it was an abomination, absent utterly of redemptive quality.

The mother who had carried the creature had died soon after its birth. The baby had lived on through the evening until Mary had caved in its chest with a rock. It had fallen to Lazarus to bury the creature as all others were too afraid. They had

thought to burn it on the village's outskirts but were fearful of the results. The smell of the charred meat, however, brief might terrify the cattle beyond recovery. They wanted to mitigate the damage done. They thought the best way was to be rid of the creature as quickly as they might, absent a purifying flame. They didn't want to draw the interest of the centurions who had made their camp on the ridge just off the mount.

This was the sixth such abomination brought forth in as many weeks. Superstitious villagers of course blamed the resurrected Lazarus. Daily threats were made against him. These were somehow kept from being enacted by the fear they held for the crucified magician. They were convinced that it was not a mere trick that they had witnessed. Lazarus had died and been resurrected. It seemed obvious to them that the Galilean magician could strike at them from beyond the grave. Perhaps He had resurrected himself and was walking amongst them in disguise. He could likely possess innocent souls on a whim. He could fly in the air and throw curses from the clouds. In their eyes He too was an abomination just like the stillborn babies.

Faced with such a foe, they needed to be sure of the parameters of His power before they struck at him. They needed to be sure Lazarus himself had not been gifted with power enough so that if he was attacked, he could kill them all in an instant.

Lazarus of Bethany had no such power. If he had power, he would not use it against them. He largely agreed with their assessment of the situation. He realized that he had been cursed. He realized that he was an unclean thing, stinking of the grave no matter how thoroughly he washed and how deeply time removed him from its necrotizing presence.

Seeing Andrew approach from the east, Lazarus opened his arms wide enough to partially obscure the setting sun behind him. "If I was one of them," he said of the superstitious villagers, "I'd be convinced of my malign nature, too. Perhaps they look into my eyes and see something different about me. They are afraid of me. As is only natural. And if they try to kill me my only fear is that they will be incapable of the act. That is, the Lord God might have placed a curse on me. I have no proof if this so. But I fear the moment for all men when God's beneficence is challenged in that way. It might cause us all to fall into disfavor, not just he who has benefitted from it primarily. God will blame the whole of men as is His tendency based on the scripture. As in the scripture the innocent and the guilty shall suffer alike."

This last sentence was blasphemous in Andrew's accounting, and he immediately placed a hand on Lazarus' shoulder.

"Brother, what is wrong?" he asked Lazarus. "Have you not heard the Good News of Our Lord's triumph? He is risen and appears before believers' eyes constantly. He came to us at our feast at Pentecost and guided us by voices. I could see the holy ghost floating above the broad table like a sea fog. And you, Lazarus, are surely his favorite. It must be the case that this is so. For you knew Him barely at all and look at the gift He has given you. A second life. Now in this second life you have the chance to proclaim Him and the miracle that He has made of you."

Wearied from his hike over the mountain trail, Andrew squatted on the ground. The setting sun at this hour was strange in this part of the world. It was almost beet colored as it sank in the western horizon. It made Andrew constantly want to close his eyes even while not staring directly at it.

He asked Lazarus what he planned to do with his new life. Or what he thought the Lord's plan was for him.

"He explained it to me once," Lazarus said. "But I swear to you I cannot now remember exactly what."

An evangelist perhaps? According to Andrew, there was a vision the apostles shared on a mountain in Galilee. The Christ had asserted full authority over this world. He said that His disciples should create disciples and build a church in His name.

Lazarus of Bethany told Andrew that if the Lord God appeared before him, he would willfully disobey each directive given to him.

"It is not for God to command me, a man created in His image," he said to Andrew. "He has given me life. But I was amongst the contented dead before that moment. There is no explanation he could offer to satisfy the ache he has created within me. He needed a tool to exercise His Will through merely. But He who is able to stop the tides on a whim surely should have let me rest. Even God surely must bow to the law of compassion. He does not need me or anyone else. But He works through us just the same."

Here was the new Church of Jesus' first heretic standing before Andrew.

"How can you not believe anymore?" he asked Lazarus, "when your very existence is a miracle?"

Lazarus told Andrew he believed in Jesus' power absolutely. Merely, it was his morality that he questioned.

"Christ has a plan," Andrew said, "for us all."

"If I reveal to you the awful plan he has for some," said Lazarus, "would you temper your enthusiasm slightly?"

"It is not for you to judge what is and isn't awful," Andrew said.

"Then why," Lazarus said, "have I been given a mind that demands that I do so? Ever since my return that's all I have been able to do: judge. But, according to you, that which He compels me to do is also evidence of my sin. You cannot be powerless and guilty at once, Andrew. You are guilty of so much. Which means your power is radiant. I can see it all around you even with my eyes closed," Lazarus said. "You have not been lowered to the status of a tool like me. Or an outcast amongst his fellow men for all time."

Putting down his stick, Lazarus led Andrew through the pasture over to the mountain's far side. It was there beyond an encampment of nomads that a large crack in the world became perceptible even at several miles.

"It opened a month ago after an oily rain," said Lazarus. "According to the nomads, the rain settled into a single place and burnt this indentation into the earth. They've been afraid to approach the valley since that moment," he said. "They say at night ghosts rise from its depths and float over the fissure until the break of dawn."

The still rotting carcasses of livestock who had ventured too close to the fissure stood as testament, at least in Lazarus' eyes, to the veracity of the nomad's testimony.

"Even I who fear death less than any man who has ever lived refuse to venture near there past sunset," Lazarus told Andrew. "So, you and I have but an hour. I found a way inside. I've hung ropes down there that will allow us to flee from its presence quickly once dusk comes."

This was an old Sumerian tale. Andrew didn't believe in such apparitions belched forth by nature as a counterargument to God's eternal order. On

the other hand, the evidence of his eyes was supremely persuasive. The closer they came, the greater the detail of the crack was revealed. The fissure was four hundred yards long and at its widest part still seemed able to be forded with a leap. In a featureless valley, he could see the twin ropes Lazarus had tied off around a boulder. Yet he still saw no evidence of the supernatural. Perhaps the earth underneath the valley had shifted for some reason and this was the result. It was provincial to think otherwise, Andrew thought. It revealed the Israelites as the bumpkins the Romans took them to be.

In the present age there was no science. Rather, there was a belief in the persistence of being that doubled as rationality. Even a true believer like Andrew of the Sea would insist that when a man blinked the world did not disappear. The Lord intervened in this world but only on His Timetable. And when he did so he announced his presence boldly. He didn't create mysteries in need of solving.

Still, it seemed walking to the fissure's edge that there was some otherworldly aspect to the feature.

"You say you've been down there before," Andrew asked Lazarus.

"Once before and at high noon. And one of the nomads kept watch over me from a distance should the rope snap."

"What did you find?"

"Descend with me and find out," Lazarus said.

"You cannot speak the truth out loud?"

"I can speak many truths about the world out loud," Lazarus said. "But seeing is believing. That is, one does not fail to believe a lie unless one sees the truth directly. It is common nature likely with all men. It is certainly not something a man in your position should question."

A man in your position. Andrew did not understand that last utterance. But he was too excited presently to question Lazarus about it. He might have been referring to Andrew's position as a new disciple of the Risen Christ. He might have meant something completely different than this. If so, it would have to be explained to him later.

Didn't matter. Even during his first life Lazarus of Bethany was always mysteriously guarded. Death had served to throw another layer of mystery upon him. He was doomed to speak in riddles until the end of his days.

Staring down into the crevice they were about to descend into, Andrew thought its blackness was profound enough to cover up any object right near the surface. He certainly could not detect the crevice's bottom.

"Follow me once I have gotten a foothold on the wall," Lazarus told Andrew throwing the bound ropes down. "You cannot not see me down there. But you will know I have gained a foothold when I pull on the rope three times."

Indeed, once submerged in shadow Lazarus immediately vanished from Andrew's sight.

It's as if the air's made of black oil, not mere shadow, Andrew thought as he tried to locate his friend down below. Rather than Lazarus what he saw on deep inspection was the occasional reflection of a bird passing above. He couldn't understand how this might be. Here was a sort of magic unknown to him. He thought it perhaps a tick of mirrors, but he couldn't say how. He couldn't say if he begged his friend to return to the surface the words would penetrate down.

He was nervous at what was in front of him but so fulsome with Jesus' Good News that he felt no fear at what he was being asked to do. Eventually three tugs on the rope were felt and Andrew

descended. His sandals were cracked already and letting bits of hard blackened sand abrade his feet with each step taken down. It didn't give him second thoughts even momentarily. This too he reasoned was the Lord's work. He assumed everything happened for a reason. He assumed this adventure was God's Will. Whatever he would see at the bottom was that which the Lord had wanted him to see. There was no danger in life for he that was of perfect faith. If a demon had dwelt at the crevice's bottom, he would be vanquished by the Lord upon Andrew's arrival.

There was a cross Andrew had fashioned mimicking the one the Jesus died on made of two sticks. Occasionally he would hold the cross up and wait for divinity to be emitted at its nexus like a light ray. His own life was insignificant thus his death was never fretted over. He welcomed death as it would be an occasion to test his faith. He knew Jesus loved him as he had stared into the halo of gnats (if that's what they were) flitting around his head. He assumed everything happened for the best in this best of all possible worlds. If not, why would Jesus have descended into the world at all? He assumed he had a plan for us all. He assumed the idea of righteousness was completely involved in adhering to the Lord's Will. Nothing else mattered in his life or anybody else's. To perceive randomness in the world was to deny the Christ's dominion in the world. To Andrew of Galilee, this was obvious. Thus, he didn't see this descent as a challenge. He was content with what the day brought him. The Lord had presented him with a challenge and he was eager to take it. He didn't doubt Good News would be received by him as the outcome.

Three feet down in the morass, Andrew found himself completely blind, as if the sun and all other light-giving bodies had been extinguished.

“Lazarus, I am above you,” Andrew yelled to the man who he had believed to be Beloved of Jesus above all others. He realized that his voice did not carry past an inch of his face. As even he could barely detect the utterance.

He was in a New Place, absent of ordinary considerations of space and light. Lazarus the Returned knew this place as the velveteen Kingdom of Death. But only he and perhaps Jesus Himself were qualified to speak about its true nature. Presently both were silent but for distinct reasons. One man’s intentions were deeply compassionate while the others were completely malign. For himself, Andrew was merely unaware. He assumed some sort of magic was at work here. But he was utterly unaware of its source.

When you are dead a millennium passes as an instant. A simple recollection spread across the span of five hundred years possesses the weight of mass religious obsession. Simple pique results in generation-wide genocide. You become a God unto your own timeline. But the God you become, being that it is you all along, is utterly devoid of compassion or the ability to redeem. Rather, this Personal God is a disgusting galaxy-spanning baby who sat in a growing pile of its own shit and groaned for mommy. You were dead, but unhappy and all-powerful. Every action became a negative re-action. And the desperate prayers of your disciples go unanswered as if unheard.

You are the God of a million torture victims’ desperate imaginings, cold and sadistic and unmoveable. Now you see the problem of all prayer. Which is that God himself is unaware of his own divinity. Better to shut your mouth than ask for help. Sometimes praying only makes it worse. Sometimes it is better to merely observe stoically and try to pull your feet from the fire by yourself.

It's the nature of death that makes it so. You, being inert, cannot answer prayers. You can merely stare at events and wonder at their origin. Misinterpretations will abound. Such as the scarecrow in Goshen, Indiana observed by Mark Reynolds from a speeding truck in 1967. It was taken as the crucified God, a certain Mr. Jesus Christ, in the April of 33 AD. So it is that both were splayed out on the cross, head down and limbs loose and non-responsive.

It was of course a natural mistake for somebody not so versed in the local culture.

"My Lord, rise!" said Andrew of Galilee repeatedly once at the crevice's bottom.

Eventually a woman walked into the Indiana field and supplemented the Christ's arms and legs with straw shoots.

Andrew the First saw and understood not. He reached forward as if to rouse the Lord of the Universe from slumber. He was alarmed as a wasp emerged from underneath a displaced button meant to be a right eye. None of these, button, eye, or wasp was partially perspicacious now. All things had seen better times by then. An evil had descended upon the land. But it would take another fifty years for ordinary men to know what to call it.

Chapter Three: Pandemonium

I.

To make a tulpa, to really make one, that is, to have it develop its own identity separate from yours, to have it draw breath and perambulate and persist apart from your concentrated gaze, to have its consciousness outlive your consciousness, an adept's focus must be narrowed to a single atom's width. With her mind, she will copy this atom incessantly until the results form first a molecule, then a protein string, up to a single cell and then the person to whom that cell belongs, naked when he or she arrived into the world, and generally looking in askance at its creator.

"Existence is an offense, agent," Levi Tate told Beatrice Ng a week after the excursion to Vincennes. She and Peter Plan had not come back empty handed. Once a body was uncovered underneath a particularly thick root structure, they had secured those remains along with the remains of the attendant, Thích Quang Self, that Agent Plan had encountered in the hallway. Immediately they shipped both corpses to Langley for analysis. In reference to the skeleton, they wanted to ascertain, likely through dental records, if they belonged to Carol Ann Rodman. As far as Mr. Self, merely knowing of his identity didn't explain his behavior.

Agent Plan wanted to know if he was a narcotics user, for example. He wanted Self's brain biopsied to check for abnormalities relating to temporal lobe epilepsy. He thought he might be someone experiencing waking hallucinations. Mostly he wanted to perform a full court press as to his reliability. His note had indicated that he was a confederate of Tate's. He wanted to know if this was so. And if it was so he wanted to know of all other Tate confederates alive or dead.

You simply couldn't ask a violent psychopath a question and expect a truthful answer. Upon confronting Levi with the note, Agent Plan admitted that this was so.

In response, Levi simply smiled and nodded. He realized then he would remain alive for a while. This was good because suddenly he had stopped being bored. Suddenly there were interesting personalities having fallen into his orbit. Beatrice Ng being by far the most interesting of them. Tate had never met a tulpa before. He had never been so spiritually inclined to travel to Tibet where most of these creatures were made.

The questions he was asking Bea were designed to gauge her psychology, if that was even applicable to such a creature. He especially wanted to know if she was resentful at having been created. Unlike so many normal humans she was not a mere mistake or simply a random conjoining of sperm and egg yielding an equally random biomass. Every atom of the agent's being indeed resulted from a fierce intentionality, a superhuman imaginative act, so rare as to be conceived of as impossible by most. Tate thought her fascinating even as he thought her pathetic. In that she lacked self-identity. She was completely as Lady Margaret wanted her. He wanted to know if she could rebel as he had rebelled. Or as Satan had rebelled when faced with

an alternative of slavery unto a Higher Power. As in a way he was God's tulpa. He wanted to know if she could form this thought. He wanted to know if she even knew what rebellion meant.

As ever he was in his chair with the retractable bolts. She had left the external cage unlocked for some reason.

Levi thought this was rich. She was daring him to take a run at her apparently. Maybe she was testing his compliance. Or maybe she was taking orders from Agent Plan.

He wanted to know all about her. Especially her early life.

"When were you born, agent?" he asked her. "Is that what your ilk call it? Being born?"

Bea told Tate she had first opened her eyes in 1922 at the great monastery, Samye, to the south of Lhasa.

"And what do you first remember about it?"

"I felt a stinging sensation on my skin," she said, "that I wasn't immediately sure about."

"And?"

"It turned out to that I was cold on the outside," she said. "And that I felt cold on the inside, too. Which turned out to be that I was hungry."

Tate said he could only imagine the outrage an ordinary person would experience waking up suddenly fully materialized. But Beatrice Ng seemed to hold no grudge at all against Lady Margaret Wallington. Which led Levi to speculate that she was incapable of doing so.

He told that she lacked free will.

"Not in the way you conceive of it I don't," she said.

"The way I conceive of it," Levi Tate said. "And what way is that?"

"The ability to violate moral law," Bea told him. "The ability to find what is good in life and war

against it. This you believe makes you an evolved person. Because the tendency of unevolved creatures is to revert to their default settings, i.e., the morality they are taught by government agencies. You believe murder provides to the murderer a secret knowledge."

"It does," said Levi Tate and waited for a response.

"In that so many ordinary people wish to murder but are bound by superstition, ignorance, or fear," said Agent Ng. "You become free through the subjugation of others."

Levi asked her if she was, in the manner of Isaac Asimov's robots, incapable of harming a human.

"It's not in my nature," she said simply. "But I can't actually tell you what I am fully capable of. To do that I would need to enact every possible situation and recall my actions perfectly."

She told Levi Tate that once having come into the world she had been accepted as one of the aspirants that the monastery took in.

"Lady Margaret was a self-styled adventuress," she said, "somebody who eschewed family on firm principle. She left the monastery in 1924 for Venice while I remained behind. There was nowhere else for me to go, you see. She tried to kill me several times with knitting needles. But the grand lama would not allow it. To him, all life was sacred. He said I could stay as long as I wanted. Then he encouraged me to become as human as possible realizing that eventually I would be forced to leave and live in society as a normal person."

Bea Ng held no grudge against Lady Margaret just as she held no disgust for Levi Tate.

"I see myself as apart from you," she told him. "Therefore, I am not in a position to judge you. I truly don't know why people act the way they do. I wish sometimes that they would stop," she said.

"And here I am trying to get them to stop. You Mr. Tate are only one amongst billions though you believe yourself something God-like and exalted. Once you are gone, our focus will shift onto somebody exactly like you."

Suddenly Levi Tate was leaning forward in his chair. "There is nobody like me," he told her. "No. There is no human ever who has seen the things I have seen or has been more of an affront to the holy order than me. I am Satan's favorite servant, you see. It is for this reason I am immortal. Just like you."

In the other room just outside Warden Stiltz' office, Peter Plan was teleconferencing with Phil Sane.

"We got the samples back from the lab," Phil said to Peter removing a bottle and eyedropper from his office desk.

Agent Plan was somewhat taken aback to hear that this was so. "When," he asked Sane. "And then why wasn't I informed?"

Director Sane told him that it had come back twenty minutes ago.

"Don't take everything so personally," Phil said to him. "Don't make it seem as if this is your individual crusade."

"I am the lead agent on this case, sir," Peter Plan said.

"That sort of designation doesn't mean shit to anybody with any power," he told him. "To me, you're just a face that hangs on a name. We're all replaceable, agent," he said. "But it makes it slightly easier to continue with you in charge. You've been to the Vincennes site," he said. "You don't need to be briefed about it."

It hadn't escaped Peter Plan that Sane said the Vincennes *site*. As opposed to the Vincennes *crime scene*.

Sane took temporary control of Skype for Business to share files with Peter.

"What forensics do you want to go over first," he was asked. "The bodies or the letter?"

"The bodies," Peter told him.

"OK," Sane said and removed the eyedropper from the bottle. "Here is a man who likes to get down to business. Letters are untrustworthy. But I never met a corpse who could lie."

Suddenly on Peter's computer screen there was an x-ray image of the skeleton that the backhoe had uncovered under the apple tree.

"Its aging is completely normal," Phil said distractedly as if reading a detailed report for the first time and attempting a summarization on the fly. Of course, I'll FTP you the files after this call. "It's just a lot of water damage long story short. And the usual parasites and minerals that attach itself to the structure at this point in its decay."

Sane opened another image. On Peter Plan's Mac it appeared as the remains of some gross mutated insect. There were twin flares of skeletal structure in the back that put one in mind of wings. The skull had a profoundly atavistic quality. Like an ape had fucked a giant wasp out of a 1950s horror movie and this was its baby.

"The deformities obviously you want to know about," Director Sane said. For some reason he was engaging in intentional understatement. "Well, agent, as you might have expected, forensics doesn't have a fucking clue."

Another high res .jpeg appeared. This of the skull in isolation highlighting the jawbone. These were not canines in the jaw's front so much as baboon fangs.

Agent Plan leaned in close to see if a dental screw existed in the fangs' bottom. He was interested to find about Tate's surgical technique.

"The DNA with all five samples taken is a perfect match for Carol Ann Rodman," Phil Sane said and hesitated. He assumed Peter would have a follow up.

"Five samples," Plan said and took out a pen and reporter's notebook that he used archaically to take notes.

"Of course, agent," Phil said. "It's SOP for three samples: skull, jaw, and torso for all skeletal remains. But in this instance, we obviously went the extra mile in attempting an ID. We sampled the canines too. We sampled the deformities, the wing bones or whatever that structure is in the back. It's all her, man. It's Mr. and Mrs. Rodman's baby girl, Carol Ann. You of course have late-stage photos to compare the skeleton with. She was a high school cheerleader with a radiant smile. And as far as I can see there is not a sign of deformity anywhere especially in the teeth and jaws."

Radiation, Peter Plan thought. But he knew enough not to spout such a ridiculous theory in the Director's presence. Better theory: Levi Tate who was a genius of crime could have planted Carol's DNA samples in the fangs. The bird wings he had grafted on her after (oh, let's hope so) he had killed her. He likely had researched FBI procedures and knew what to do. To prove this theory, Plan needed many more samples. He also needed repeated pass throughs of the skeleton through an MRI. There had to be evidence of suturing on the prostheses. He didn't care how meticulous Tate was. There had to be a physical remnant of whatever technique he used. Maybe metal screws and surgical stitching would be too obvious. So, something else. If he had sewn the pieces on her when alive to create a bit of connective bone growth, this too could eventually be discovered. He thought it was obvious what must be done. He thought it was so obvious that he was

shocked that Director Sane had not yet blurted it out. Surely, he could not be throwing up his hands at this early stage in investigation. He had indicated to Peter that he realized the magnitude of this case. He knew he was dealing with an objectively evil presence. But the rote recitation of unhelpful data coming from Director Sane seemed to show he had no clue about how to proceed.

Before the meeting, Peter recalled for the Director the span of deformities identified. Therefore, Agent Plan was not surprised when the briefing stopped long enough for the Director to tilt his head back and dangle the eyedropper above each eye. Upon depositing each drop of medication, if that's what it was, onto his sclera's surface, there was an audible hiss transmitted. As if a water droplet had been deposited onto a burner. These were the eyes feeding. They were taking in the moisture offered. Eventually Sane raised his head and turned back toward the camera. Now there were bloody tears running down the Director's face. Agent Plan did not dare point these out to him.

Rather than demand further testing, Plan would write an email to multiple directors including Phil Sane. This was a politically fraught maneuver, but at least it would relieve him of the sense that Sane was pigeon-holing the investigation. Sane could yell and scream all he wanted about Peter's need for discretion. but at least the evidence would be presented to the entire Bureau chain of command. The problem with asking Phil now for more resources was that if he had said no, Peter would be insubordinate if he appealed up the chain-of-command. He had not been given a gag order yet, but he assumed it was coming. Not coming up with a realistic *modus operandi* was a complete fail from the criminal science point of view. He thought eventually the forensic failure would cause Phil Sane

to close ranks. It was a natural thing to have happen when a trail has gone cold. The Bureau didn't want its competency questioned. Ever. They didn't want whispers starting in the intelligence community that they might be in over their heads.

As of now, however, Director Sane was administering the case as if there was nothing exceptional to it.

"What are your next steps, agent," he asked Peter. "Parallel to Langley's efforts in the next week, what do you plan to do?"

Agent Plan said that there were four more Midwestern cases already Levi Tate had copped to and revealed in detail the placement of remains.

"We'll have two teams of three available for exhumation and I'll fly back as needed," Agent Plan told the Director. "I've given them instruction to be extra careful to any remains they find. I told them to wait before handling a given remain as these might be booby-trapped. We have a procedure set up that upon discovering so much as a toenail they are to construct a cordon and wait further instructions. I've told them not to even look at the pit once the cordon is complete," he told Sane. "I don't want anything compromised. I told them to go buy tarps from the local Home Depot and stretch them over the pit. I mean, there might be a fragment of a single half eaten bone that confirms Tate's method. I'm convinced he's a master at covering up. I'm convinced he has no intention of telling us the real story how."

Sane blinked his eyes spastically as a dying moth struggling to escape a spider web would before replying.

"The real story is of how," he said. "But what's the fake story? What's he been telling you that leads you to question his veracity?"

"He claims magic powers for himself," Peter Plan said.

Director Sane hesitated. "What kind of magic powers?" he asked the agent.

"What kind? Excuse me," said Peter Plan. Then he asked Sane, "Are there different kinds of delusional fantasies?"

On Phil Sane's desk, on a legal notepad just visible in the image's frame was the set of numbers taken from the Zimmerman Telegram that had hung on Plan's office wall.

He thinks I'm involved in this somehow, Peter Plan thought, astonished. He thinks I'm in cahoots with Tate! He's executed a counter intel probe to smoke me out!

There was no other reason he could think of for copying the coded message behind his back and discussing it with someone else. Sane (and Lord knew who else) was investigating Peter as Peter was investigating Leviticus Tate. Perhaps that was why Plan was assigned to the case in the first place. Up until this time he had been working cases related to interstate commerce fraud. He was wondering why he had been kicked up suddenly to the highest of high-profile assignments. Couldn't have been his bust of a Michigan cigarette smuggling operation five years back. At least not that alone.

A slow dawning reality made itself known to Peter Plan in stages. He was the prey not the hunter. This entire investigation was mere misdirection intended to lull him into a false sense of security. Very soon he would find himself under arrest and protesting his innocence in the same Langley interrogation rooms that he used to serve as technical support in his first job out of the academy. It was all very disorienting and humbling for him. He had no idea what he had done to

provide the impression that he was an agent requiring an internal investigation.

Could have been something so minor as the lack of a receipt for a claimed expense. Nowadays picking such fights seemed *de rigueur* for the FBI. But in such a circumstance where they had him dead to rights, they would already have moved in for the kill. They didn't care about due process when it came to one of their field agents. All investigations had a price tag, after all. If they had the evidence to fire Plan (or worse) they would have done so by now. They wouldn't resort to subterfuge to get what they wanted.

His first order of business apart from the Tate investigation would be to smoke Phil Sane out.

"I think I've got some homework to catch up on," he told Director Sane once urged to do some reading on magic. Sane had mentioned to Peter that every culture held some belief in the occult. There was value to the research. Levi Tate assuredly believed that magic was real. He constantly referred to himself as a wizard of some high standing. This spoke to his motivation if not his method of operation. Presently he was repeating the old ways with modern technology. He could have been preparing bodies for some ritual sacrifice rather than killing them indiscriminately in the manner that he had been charged.

It was obvious enough, at least to Phil Sane. But Peter Plan was seemingly bound by logic and the conviction that the world made sense underneath it all. Every bit of magic was anathema to him. In that if any portion of it turned out to be true, the entire world, or the explanations for it, would instantly come undone. It was a risk to even think about making the inquiry. Because who knew how thought affected reality?

Levi Tate had become an object of revulsion for Peter plan. Merely because Tate was convinced of magic's dominance in the world. Peter solving the case would also lead to his refuting the notion that human evil was aligned with black magic. Merely, human evil was aligned with human evil. There was no metaphysical aspect to it. It was some moral choice individuals made for themselves. It was a part of themselves, and they must be full responsibility for it. Agent Peter Plan believed this deeply. He saw Phil Sane's inquiries about magic ceremonies on Tate's part to be backsliding. He thought Phil deserved to be drummed out of the Bureau for it.

The last thing he mentioned to Sane was the continuous flack he was getting from Warden Stiltz concerning the FBI's expanding relationship with Levi Tate.

"He's threatening to pull our access if we don't go back to the beginning," he told the Director. "And that, realize, could take days."

"More likely several months, agent," Phil Sane said.

"Sir? Come again?"

"Think about it for a second: Tate's stayed alive this long. If we tell him he's going to be our consultant indefinitely I wouldn't put it past someone from the prison marching him out into the courtyard and putting a bullet in his head. No love loss there, as you could tell."

"Agent Ng mentioned he killed a guard in his stay here."

"I wouldn't know," Phil Sane said. "They observe radio silence on all internal matters at that supermax. Even the surviving kin might be lied to for as long as they can get away with it."

"Maybe a subpoena might scare the Warden straight," Peter Plan said. Maybe a threat of an

investigation into his little Kansas fiefdom might be enough to have him back off.”

Director Sane picked up the same piece of paper the Zimmerman Telegram had been transcribed on. “Stiltz?” he asked Peter Plan as he began to write. “His name is Warden Stiltz?”

“Yessir,” said Agent Plan.

“OK. Rhymes with wilts. I’ll see to him personally,” the Director said. Then he began to fold the paper over itself carefully and multiple times. So that there was a strange oblong shape resting in his opened palm.

Then he said, “Stiltz. Stilts, wilts.” Then he closed his hand tightly around the shape and let out a guttural howl. Then he abruptly disconnected the call.

It might have been considered a strange way to end a call but after only six days on this case Peter had become accustomed to ambient weirdness. As if all life had never made sense and any incongruity was to be dealt with easefully as if it had always been expected. Such passive acceptance of the absurd seemed to clash with Plan’s superficial desire to have the truth win out. Walking out of the prison’s conference room it was this incongruity that bothered him solely. He thought, “am I becoming just like everybody else? A type of blood cow indifferent about the violence around me?” He thought it might be so. But, then again, the fact that he was upset about it indicated to him that he wasn’t so far gone. He assumed that his insomnia since touching down in Kansas had numbed his emotional responses. He assumed a ten-hour sleep would have him right as rain.

He didn’t believe a soul could be corrupted that quickly. It might have been factually inaccurate, but this was what he thought. Just like organic rot, spiritual rot likely increased in stages. He thought

there would be warning signs surely once the decay became pronounced. He thought he should be more comfortable than normal while in Tate's presence.

He thought a sure first sign of evil in oneself was the acceptance of it in others. Presently Peter still dreaded meeting with Levi. He was assured, therefore, that he was less like Levi than one would have assumed was the case in a situation when rapport was needed.

He was safe for another week. Likely he would check himself each week to see how far he had slipped. He could always pull himself off the case after making an excuse about his mental health. He would consult with Agent Ng to see if she noticed any changes in his demeanor. He would be entirely cautious and methodical in his approach. He felt this was what he owed himself. He felt there was nothing preventative that could be done in his line of work regarding his personal corruption except to wait and see how fast it progressed.

In Levi Tate's presence he felt dirty, under constant inspection, fearful, bug-like.

"I can see the warden's point," he said to himself returning to the prison corridor where death row resided. Tate's very presence was noxious. An extended dose of him might render a person incapable of rational thought. Like a stinging fly, Levi's mendacity would come to seem oppressive. Peter Plan too wanted to see Tate merge with infinite.

He thought the best thing for all parties was for the supermax prison administrators and the FBI to reach an accord which would allow the case to be expedited. He thought they shared a high-level common goal which was for justice to be done. He would like to be there when Tate was executed. He would like to be sitting there in the observation room bleachers watching him get his.

Passing by Stiltz' office, Agent Plan thought to knock and say hello as a courtesy. However, upon first contact with the door, he found himself standing in the office threshold watching Stiltz at his desk carving small crosses into his face with a pocketknife. He was going about his work in a precise manner that seemed to belie any mania that the act itself suggested. As if putting on makeup. Or plucking his eyebrows before a night out with the girls.

"Excuse me," Plan said and then closed the door. He was sure that the Warden Stiltz hadn't heard him.

As Peter was the soul of propriety on the job, he paid Stiltz no mind. It didn't bother him that Stiltz had gone insane and was doing evil things to himself as if to punish another man. He was his own voodoo doll.

Stiltz had lost the thread completely that connected soul to body. Now he was on his own. And apparently he was comfortable that this was so.

II.

During the interview Tate insisted to Peter that he needed to be on scene.

"I was going through some rough patches in my life when I ran into them," he told Peter Plan when several victims were mentioned. "Lotta boozing then," he said. "Quite frankly, I would need a physical reminder to tell you where I lived back then, let alone where I buried the trash."

Of course, this was an untruth. But having committed to keeping Tate alive at least another two months there was nothing Plan could do. Somehow Tate had realized there was nothing Plan could do. He was using the situation to his advantage. Perhaps in less secure quarters he

would attempt an escape ala Hannibal Lector in *The Silence of the Lambs*. Perhaps he meant to push Peter to the breaking point. This was a psychological exercise for him.

Tate had never tried pretending he was sorry about his actions. He said merely that he wished to cooperate.

He told Agent Plan his fondest wish would be to be remembered as somebody who cooperated.

He was trying to serve as a role model for future serial killers perhaps. Perhaps this was all an inside joke for an audience of one. Levi would go to the gas chamber smiling because of it. Which, as far as Agent Plan was concerned, was fair enough.

When travelling the Bureau wanted to keep Tate isolated and under multiple armed guards always.

"Don't get too close is the golden rule in this," Agent Plan told the guards of the Knox County Kentucky jail astride the Sheriff's Department where Tate was being kept for the evening after the flight out here. On the flight out here at Agent's Plan's insistence, Tate had been sedated then handcuffed to Peter. The flight itself was terrifying for Agent Plan. Even while narcotized Tate was dangerous. Peter thought he could take down the entire plane while semi-conscious. He could jump out of his seat maybe and kick out a window. Likely there were a hundred ways Peter had never thought of. More so, FAA regulations made the agents empty their ammo clips for the duration. According to the FAA, a loaded gun was far more dangerous than the psychotic it was being aimed at thirty thousand feet. They obviously didn't know with whom they were dealing. Agent Plan wanted to drive back from Kentucky to Kansas. He hadn't prepared yet, but this was his idea. He thought it would be easier on everybody, especially him. If he drove he could carry a loaded gun. He disagreed profoundly that a

loaded gun was the greater danger when Tate was in flight.

All throughout the flight, Levi had sat with his head facing the aisle mumbling his ABC's in the sort of guttural monotone Tibetan monks use speaking the morning chant. He would mumble ABC's and at a particular moment within a particular sequence substitute a high-pitched command: "*dream!*" He would substitute the command for the letter "B" one sequence then the letter "C" the next sequence. After "Z" he would start over at "A." He did not stop until the plane's landing gear was deployed. Perhaps he was trying to goad Peter into attacking him so he could garner sympathy with the others on the plane.

More than one observer, including Agent Ng, thought Tate was trying to cast a spell. But to try and put an end to it would mean that they had believed in magic. They were too embarrassed to admit that this was the case. Even Agent Ng who was the product of a form of magic was embarrassed. She dealt with it by putting on a pair of airplane headphones and watching a John Cusack movie all the way to Kentucky. The plot concerned a recovering alcoholic and the talking horse that loved him. Or maybe it was the man who talked and loved and the horse that drank.

Peter Plan had brought the croupier paddle used in supermax to shove Tate's food tray over to him.

"I realize you've dealt with dangerous figures of this sort before," he told his underlings placing the paddle on the metal table between them, "but I think it's safe to say you've never encountered anything like him. He has the ability to weaponize anything. Words, bits of food, or even his own saliva. If you detect a bit of his spit on you, report it immediately and head to the infirmary. He must have his back turned to you before you approach.

He will try to draw you into idle chatter. This you should realize is a psychological ploy. He's trying to probe you for a weakness. He's trying to get you to lower your guard."

Agent Plan had an idea vaguely formed that he would sleep in the county jail in a spare room. The jailers found this idea extremely objectionable, and they said so bluntly. Instead, they directed he and Agent Ng to the Holiday Inn Express and Suites in nearby Corbin where it was their misfortune to run into the tail end of a Daniel Boone convention. Lotta talk about mule-skinning and making a tonic out of spiked blazing star and your own saliva. Some of them had brought their own moonshine with them which they were passing around in the kitchen as Ng and Plan trudged off to the elevator.

"If one of these post-modern hillbillies wakes me up," Peter told Bea. "I'm gonna walk down there and bust them for possession. It's as simple as that, Agent," he told her. "I'm not gonna do anything as vulgar as threaten to show my badge and threaten civilians. It's straight to jail with them. I've got sleep to catch up on. I've got dreams, unspeakable visions to encounter for which there is no precedent or cursory description possible."

He was nervous because of Tate. And, unlike most individuals, when Peter was nervous, he grew lethargic. He needn't have worried about the post-modern hillbillies. As seconds after his head hit the pillow Peter was dead to the world, tumbling in the velveteen void. Jesus Christ, Savior of Man, was at the bottom of this void. He was decked in a luxurious robe and holding out his arms toward Peter. As if he was a child thrown in the air by his father. He wanted something from Peter apparently, if only to convene some sort of wisdom unto him. Plan, exhausted by previously described events, was in no mood to receive wisdom from anybody.

But Jesus Christ was his personal savior. He had said it on many occasions both informal and sacrosanct. He had called Jesus soft names in many a mused rhyme. It didn't matter to him that at least on this occasion Jesus was likely illusory. Couldn't the Lord communicate through illusion as well as through truth? When Jesus spoke either through fantasy or inspired vision, Peter Plan listened. He thought of this as Christian SOP. But he was tired, man, of listening.

Have you ever been so exhausted that you are exhausted even in dreams? But Jesus, if he was really the Jesus of the New Testament, would give him strength. His words would penetrate into Peter's psyche regardless of Peter's present state of unconsciousness. That was the great thing about worshiping an omnipotent being. You could always be assured that there would never be miscommunication between parties. Christ could blink after all and sear the universe like scallops in white wine. The fault was His. In His Presence, all men were submissive. Peter Plan was submissive in His Presence. But he realized it wasn't his fault. He would soon be reclaimed, "saved" as evangelicals say. Jesus had promised this. And the one thing an omnipotent being cannot do (oddly) was lie. It's a paradox few theologians dared to tackle. Those that did likely wound-up atheists. And so, their theodicy was discounted beforehand.

In his dream Agent Plan was face down in the dust in a position reminiscent of bowing. But, in reality, it was just that his body had stopped responding to him.

"My Lord, what is required of me?" Peter Plan asked Jesus and found the strength in himself to look up. There was something tragically wrong with the Christ's face. That is, it wasn't there. That is, it was there, but obscured in a halo of something that

might have been a cloud of gnats to a common observer or might have been the *pabhàmandala*, the halo of light surrounding the Awakened One's head, to a learned observer [*ed. such as Lady Margaret Wallington of Northumbria of whom more will be demanded shortly*]. In this case, the mandala did not enlighten but obscure the object of veneration. To all but the faithful this would seem a telling detail. Only bad guys walked around in disguises generally.

On the other hand, maybe some mysteries were there to be solved. Peter Plan was not holy enough to see the true face of God. Or it could have been that God lacked a true face to begin with.

For the longest time the Veiled Christ was silent to Peter's repeated pleas for guidance. Eventually he began to communicate, albeit in a highly obtuse way.

"He was making weird hand gestures to get his point across," Agent Plan said to Agent Ng that morning over breakfast. Suburbanized moonshiners surrounded them in various states of disrepair. They had schlepped their empty mason jars down with them to the restaurant.

He told Bea the hand gestures had nothing to do with American Sign or any other sign language (though he was unfamiliar with them all).

"The reason I know it's not Sign is that he kept on using the same gestures over again absent of a syntax."

Furthermore, all these gestures were executed with no intention of cluing Peter into their meaning.

"He wasn't trying to communicate, I think, so much as to cue me to the realization that there were things I didn't know," Peter told Bea. "He wasn't going to tell me what these things were, but he wanted to let me know that I was in the dark about them. They were symbols more so than

words. They represented ideas more so than individual objects and actions out of which ideas could be built."

Upon being asked by Bea to reproduce for her one of these hand gestures, Agent Plan found himself, much to his amazement, doing so perfectly.

"Don't know how I remember this, but I do," he said holding up one palm with his thumb and forefinger folded in a circle. "This was the first of them that I can recall," he said. "Afterwards there were others. But I recall that this is the one that Jesus always came back to."

The *Vitarka mudra* or teaching mudra symbolized the teaching phase of Buddhist practice, Bea Ng said. The circle formed by the thumb and index finger maintained the constant flow of energy as there was no beginning or end, only perfection.

"I remember it all as if from a dream," she told him. "I think there are ten mudras in all," she said, "meaning one thing or the other."

The *Bhumisparsha mudra*, she said, was the most common of these. In this stance the Buddha pointed down at the earth with his right hand.

"It is a symbol of him overcoming temptation," she said to Peter when his eyes lit up with recognition. "Just before attaining enlightenment," she said, "he Called the Earth to Witness the Truth. That is, the earth became the truth over any illusion," she said. "It guaranteed that which he experienced was not illusion. For without the earth there would be no separating clear perception from dream."

When the Veiled Christ flashed that sign at him, Peter recalled, the cloud of gnats parted slightly to reveal a rough set of features below. Perhaps he was indicating that the meaning of this mudra held the key to his face's obfuscation. One would vanish when the other appeared.

"He only held it very briefly," Agent Plan recalled for Bea in between bites of powdered egg. By its brevity, he perhaps was indicating that he too was an aspirant to enlightenment. Jesus had called the earth to witness his vision but been denied. Presently, therefore, he existed only in dream (illusion).

The third mudra he had witnessed coming from his Savior was a combo of the Ronnie James Dio *moloich* with an OK made with the middle fingers.

"Just like this," he told her and reproduced it accurately. Several of the Daniel Boone aficionados at the nearby table thought they were talking about heavy metal and responded with *moloichs* of their own. Of course, the agent had no idea about what was going on. He assumed he had stumbled into a type of masonic gesture. He was just as ignorant about heavy metal as he was Buddhism. More so maybe. As at least one of these subjects felt worth studying.

"The *Karana mudra*," Bea said and reproduced it for him. "Use it when trying to expiate evil of some kind," she said. "Or maybe as a warning that evil exists nearby."

Bea's interpretation about what Peter Plan had seen in his dream revolved around the third mudra. Which, according to her, trumped the other two in importance.

"He's giving you a warning, not a taste of what is, but a taste of what will be," Agent Ng said, stirring her coffee. She rarely ate and when she did, she ate in private. She believed ingestion to be a fundamentally disgusting process. She felt confident that eventually she could outgrow the need to eat entirely. Her ninety-second birthday was three weeks from today. Director Sane alone knew about her origins. He had vowed secrecy. He had

suggested she do the same about his extraordinary origins too.

According to this interpretation of the mudras, Peter was in danger.

"What sort of danger?" he asked her.

"Can't say obviously," she told him. "But you can bet it has more to do with the heart than the head."

"Come again?"

"There are spiritual ailments," Bea said, "apart from ailments of the body and mind. But people who aren't aware of their spiritual side are unaware when it becomes rife with disease. They lose the purpose of their life and are unaware when it happens disbelieving it ever had purpose. They think *I have always been like this*. When it is not the case. They cease to become involved in I-Thou and become involved in I-It. It's very mechanistic and, at least to machines, imperceptible. Likely the Christly vision was warning against something like that occurring with you. Jesus was telling you that the machine part of your soul is taking over."

Plan, who was leading the most sensational of mass murder investigations, had no idea what any of this meant. Therefore, he rejected it out of hand.

"If the Lord had a plan for me," he told Bea, "He would say so in plain English."

He deeply believed this. Which could only mean that what he had witnessed was an illusion. Mudras were for another religion, another identity altogether. There were no abstractions in his religion, merely symbols that pointed to an absolute truth. There was nothing to know when one knew the Lord. when one knew the Lord, His Mercy washed over you with overwhelming insistency like Niagara Falls. God was high and all-powerful. And you were low and weak. God was a part of you but there was no part of you in Him.

Not that Agent Plan had ever been especially observant. But he was, ever since this case's advent, religious. He saw now that Jesus Christ was the world's only hope. In a realm where Levi Tate could thrive, corruption was all-encompassing. Fighting evil should never simply be a matter of doing one's best, thwarting the eternal darkness every so often. Rather, it could only be engaged on its own supernatural terms. Only Christ could redeem the world, but he seemed otherwise occupied. This was to judge by the glimpse Peter had of him. He seemed dedicated to the same dreadful esoterica Tate seemed dedicated to. He seemed an object of mystery, less of compassion. He was one more dark wizard albeit of a deeply powerful stripe. He seemed less an object of veneration than an object of fear.

It couldn't be this way for real, could it? Was the God of All Compassion another dark wizard whose greatest trick was to make you believe that he was something far greater? Could the raising of the dead be no more worth venerating than the destruction of the living? Both actions should ultimately be considered "spells" cast on a world without will or First Cause. Whereas the Jesus of the Gospels, the good Jesus, raised Lazarus as a physical metaphor for what could be.

"He said, *I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in Me, though he may die, he shall live,*" Peter Plan said to Bea Ng on the way over to the first site. For Jesus, there was no ambiguity in the statement. Christ was not a magician promising an illusion. Unlike a magician, His power was limitless and justly wielded. He performed miracles to rouse others to believe when no miracles were present. His entire concern was taken up in matters of salvation for others. He had no motivation besides love for humanity. Thus, in many ways, He

was at the other end of an enormous behavioral spectrum from Levi Tate. He was guileless where Tate was all about mystery.

The Unveiled Christ required belief merely. Which was easy enough to provide. Peter Plan assumed He had only one face. He assumed with a bit of faith anybody could look upon it with reverence.

It was all self-evident, he thought, even to one such as him who was not a steady church goer.

"Somebody like you," he said to Bea, "likely don't know what I'm talking about when I talk about such matters."

As her status as a conjured being was supposed to be a secret, Agent Ng was alarmed at the *somebody like you*.

"How so?" she asked him.

"You're a Buddhist, aren't you?"

"Not really," she said.

"Not really?"

Bea told him that she, being a spiritual object, wasn't so spiritual. In that, having realized what the truth was, she didn't think about it much anymore. She saw the sun every day but didn't think much about that either. Its presence was just a self-evident proposition to her. She could hold up one hand and see the evidence of the supernatural from the tip of her finger down. Supernature was self-evident and therefore out of mind. She thought Agent Plan was interpreting his own visions. She thought some type of dark magic was obviously loose in the world and was attacking him from within.

Bea Ng was incapable of dreaming. Therefore, she was at a loss concerning the reason for her screaming out in her sleep from time to time.

"I have a nervous condition," she would explain to the rare soul who would check on her after such

an episode. Generally, she slept alone. She would seldom need to explain herself to others and when she was forced to, she was generally so out of practice that she tended to trip on her own words.

During their latest interview session, Tate asked Agent Ng why she thought she screamed at night.

Her operative theory was it was related to the trauma of her coming into the world wholly formed. Humans were born as infants devoid of so many mental capabilities that they were shielded from life's baseline terrors. Imagine what it would be like to be born fully conscious. Bea assumed she had repressed extreme fear. Truly she didn't think about it all that much. She knew she was weak in comparison to Levi Tate. She had assumed many things of Tate that Agent Plan had not yet begun to suspect.

To transport him out to this site, a bowling alley just off the interstate, Agent Plan insisted Tate be hand cuffed and hooded. He couldn't articulate to anybody why the hood was necessary. Merely he was trying to be as unpredictable with Levi as possible. He assumed Tate had some sort of escape plan. He had come up with a strategy of controlled randomness that might keep Tate on defense at least for the while it took for him to reveal what his real intentions were.

Levi had given the coordinates of this bowling alley parking lot belatedly after Peter threatened to ship him back to Kansas.

"It's a place I need to visit first before describing exactly where," he told him. "It'll serve to jog the memory as occasionally I used to hang out there. There will be no digging required, agent," he had said to Peter. "That, I can attest to with absolute clarity."

When the agents opened the cruiser door for him, Tate banged his head. Immediately he fell to the ground.

"Nobody touch him!" Peter told the four state troopers and Agent Ng as Tate lay there motionless. They had quickly formed a circle around him and with his polyester hood on it was impossible to ascertain if he was truly hurt. Peter couldn't imagine that he was hurt. Not in that clumsy way. Thus, he was trying to draw the police to him. He wanted to make physical contact with them. For some reason.

Another thirty seconds of him lying completely still motivated Agent Plan to unholster his gun.

"Get up," he said to Levi and removed the gun's safety. He thought if something was going to happen it should happen here in the open light of morning. He thought if Tate was going to try something this place was as good as any. There were no civilians around to be held as hostages for example. Peter thought better here than almost any place else.

Slowly as he might Levi rose to his feet. He turned toward Agent Plan. He sucked a bit of the polyester hood into his mouth until the imprint of his face was pressed against it. To Peter it seemed slightly monstrous as if he had been transformed by magic.

He bowed his head. Carefully Agent Plan removed the hood as if to prepare himself for what resided underneath.

"This is a game to you," Peter Plan told him, "But it isn't to us."

"I know it isn't," Levi Tate. "And such rigidity will be your downfall eventually."

Plan stopped himself before asking what he meant by this. Having been in Levi's presence only a few hours, Peter still knew enough not to play any game Tate had devised. If he wanted Tate to talk,

Peter would be silent. And vice-versa. He assumed this was the only safe procedure with Tate. His end goal with every game was escape and murder. He was beyond notions of self-amusement. Thus, his willfulness must be countered at every opportunity.

Peter assumed it was a losing game overall. That was why Tate must be put to death as quickly as they might. Time was of the essence presently as if a hostage had been taken. And Agent Plan seemingly was the hostage.

Having recovered himself, Levi led them to a weedy path parallel to the interstate.

"This doesn't look like it leads anywhere," Plan said to Levi. "Time for a rethink maybe."

As best he could while being bound in iron, Levi turned around.

"I assure you," Tate said to him. "We haven't taken a false step yet. I think once we arrive, you'll agree with me. As it was *your* hideout once as well as mine."

Yours as well as mine. As they progressed down the path this comment ate at Peter Plan insistently like some flesh-devouring insect let loose in his underwear. Despite his best intentions, he would at some point be forced to ask Tate what he meant. Of course it was what Leviticus Tate wanted. But for some reason the agent was unable to stop himself from giving it to him. He didn't understand how this situation had come to be. He was equally disturbed by his powerlessness in the face of Tate's enticement as the enticement itself. He didn't understand the Taoist concept of iron and silk, the idea of a reed being strongest when it was able to bend in the wind. He believed his job was to shepherd Tate into the gas chamber while simultaneously extracting information about his hidden bloody past. If only for the sake of bookkeeping, he had to do it. He didn't understand

how all of this might be beside the point. Or that one task might be, from a moral perspective, at cross-purposes with another. He didn't understand that every government's authority came from its ability to coerce its citizens into compliance. And when a given citizen refused to be coerced, its authority was forfeit. The power of the federal government didn't derive from God Almighty as Peter might have claimed. It derived from its guns and handcuffs and stun grenades and prisons and battering rams and nooses and gas chambers. Most people, certainly most criminals, knew this to be the case. But Peter Plan was completely blind to it. He saw himself as a white knight in a white knight fraternity. He was the unbending reed that snapped in a breeze. Before meeting him, Tate had learned this was the case. In truth, it didn't matter if Peter accepted any of Levi's challenges. He was fucked just being born. Just as most people were fucked just being born. The universe was supremely deterministic (though we flattered ourselves that this was not the case). Free will was always a dubious concept. It made no sense to claim it existed when few could define what it was to begin with.

He thought once free of Tate's presence the agent would meet with an FBI therapist to see if he hadn't been driven insane. He had an inkling that this was how insanity progressed, as a kind of cognitive loop that concerned itself with philosophical puzzles that by their nature were impossible to solve. He had always felt that it would be necessary at some point in this case to receive an external "check" on the obsessions and manias that rose naturally from being in Levi's presence. Peter would require the services of a disinterested professional who would neither judge nor validate the notions that were being created in him almost

spontaneously like blooming mushrooms. He didn't blame himself or consider himself weak because of this need. On the contrary: it was to be expected. He assumed Bea Ng would require psychological care too at some point. He made a mental note to talk to her about it. As she didn't seem to him like a self-effacing person. She was as placid and insectile as Levi Tate. She seemed to be in rapport with him.

Good thing Tate was with them. As the place that he was leading the police to was damn near in another dimension. Even with an accurate but general recollection, it would have taken them days to discover it on their own. The weedy path led to a gully which contained an enormous sewer pipe at its southern edge that was so overgrown with foliage that it was invisible to inspectors even while standing five inches in front of it. The pipe led to a series of viaducts that had been built on the sly after WWII as part of the emergency defense plan to buttress infrastructure against Soviet nukes. It had been abandoned in the 60s when black budgetary priorities had shifted to the Vietnam conflict. It was a hundred feet underground in the middle of nowhere. Likely various officials could hole up there like rats after the flood once the Last War came. They hadn't gotten around to building apartments or a working ventilation system. For a serial killer it was nirvana, however. Black and secret and silent. Tate claimed he had lived here for months at one time with a troop of anarchist circus performers drawing inspiration from Artaud, Barnum, and J.W. Gacy in equal amounts.

"We'd go out at night and forage," Levi said sitting on a moldy concrete step as two troops began to move a five-ton iron grate gone irritable with rust. "We'd hit the tiny town by foot and disappear back here," he told them. "To the cops we were like ghosts," he said. "They usually lost the

trail past the bowling alley. We did whatever we wanted. Stole TVs and motorbikes, kidnapped women, children. Sometimes raped and killed them on a whim. Some of the clowns in the circus were aficionados of Aleister Crowley. A lot of Sex Magik going on whose conclusion was blood sacrifice. I for my part never partook in such nonsense. The rituals that is, not the rape. I always told them if you needed magic to force your will on another your will could use a boost. I found them bourgeois in the extreme. Which was why we parted ways eventually say around 1987."

This was too much information for the scope of the investigation and Plan told him so irritably after the grate was opened.

"You're trying to shock us," Agent Plan said to him. "And I don't see the rationale behind the strategy. We all saw what you did with Carol Ann Rodman's body. We all know what you're capable of," he told him. "You don't have to convince us you're evil. You don't have to open our eyes to make us see what sort of monster we have in our midst."

Through the portal that the grate guarded came an enormous room that was lit from above by the light pouring down from multiple seven story silos.

"It was once meant to house multiple MIRV-packing ICBMs," Levi told them. "This room that we're in now was the exhaust room. A worker left the manual behind them in the drawers is how I know," he said. "The idea was this was post-Holocaust clean-up," he said. "They would want to know if anybody was left alive particularly in the old Soviet Union," he said. "If there were any dense population centers left, they would lob one of these devices at them. Two hundred megatons a throw, according to the manual. Militarily, I think the idea was to broadcast to the peoples of the world that

the USA was not dead yet. They wanted to forestall an invasion by South America, say, who would see easy pickings in the irradiated north. They would lob one or two ICBMs and wait. Nobody would know what their capabilities were or where they came from. They wanted to crawl into the survivors' heads was the point. They considered the purveying of mass death to be ultimate social act, the ultimate act that demonstrated a technological mastery. The apes or the super intelligent cockroaches that came after humanity would marvel at the prowess and the planning of the Kentucky Bunker Dwellers. The goddamn place would become the new Valley of the Kings. They were for the most part devoid of hope or compassion. Company men, you might say. You and I, agent, might fit in well."

Ignoring the easily identified narcissistic equivalence, Peter asked him, "Is this where you stored the bodies?"

Levi Tate said that it was.

"Where? Under the concrete?"

Tate said it was a self-evident proposition about where.

In reply, Agent Plan unholstered his pistol yet again. He placed its barrel under Levi's chin.

"Is this where we bid adieu, agent?" Levi Tate asked calmly. "It's really too bad for you, and not me."

"How's that?" Peter Plan said.

"Because I know death is the end," he said. "For me, it's just an avenue of escape. You consign me to the darkness believing it is a realm of justice. But in the darkness one layer below there's only more darkness. It doesn't matter to me. But when I'm gone the questions that gnaw at you will remain. Who knows, maybe you will take it to the grave with you. For you, I think death will not be an escape. Just another means of self-torture. With that in

mind, I recommend that you pull the trigger. In front of everybody. Pull it now, please.”

Once Plan had retreated back into the room’s prodigious shadows holding his unfired gun, Agent Ng approached Levi.

“We’re somewhat confused about your allusion,” she said to him simply. “That it is self-evident. What is? What is it that’s self-evident here?”

Levi Tate looked at her. “When a riddle is presented to you, freak,” he told her, “It’s considered bad form to ask for the answer at once. A riddle is a gift that provides delight by its refusing to be resolved immediately. Asking me for the answer forthwith is the same as telling me to shut up,” he said. “And considering how rudely I’ve been treated already by your partner you will understand why I refuse to answer. All riddles are solvable. Or else they wouldn’t be considered riddles. Merely cryptic statements rather with lies dwelling at their center. But I have not lied to you yet, agent, and never will. You press into the statement a little more and see for yourself. The riddle will eventually yield to your ministrations. I promise. And then everything will be so obvious to you that you will be embarrassed for yourself having begged me to fill in the blanks for you.”

The riddle Levi Tate told Peter was that it was a self-evident proposition where the bodies were kept. As a caterpillar in its chrysalis was self-evident.

“Meaning that the evidence is out in the open somewhere around here surrounding us,” Agent Ng said to all those assembled. Peter of late had gone to sit on a moldy step by himself. “So I think what each of us must do,” she told them all, “is to quiet down and observe. There’s still enough light around here to see for ourselves,” she said. “It should be a ten-minute exercise. We’ll look around quietly and then report back quietly. There’s bound to be

something that one of us finds. Something written on the wall maybe that turns out to be a precise set of instructions. We'll all walk around and report back. And then as a group we'll investigate what any of us finds."

Bea didn't think really that Tate or one of his cohorts had left a precise set of instructions on one concrete wall identifying where a given body was stashed. Not his style. Most importantly he wouldn't have implicated himself so easily. His killing spree had spanned thirty years and suggested if only due to its length an ability to cover his tracks. In fact, the only crimes for which he had been convicted he had admitted to up front. For reasons only he knew, he had copped to a series of murders without hope of garnering a reduced sentence. He was ready to die was the sole reason he offered for doing so. He was fulsome with cunning now as before. Giving cops a de facto confession letter in the form of a spray-painted graffito was simply out of character for him. The first rule of murder was to hide the body completely. It was next to impossible to prove a crime absent of any physical remains. It was easier said than done of course but this was the rule. Their placement would never be "self-evident." Not by him or any other murderous psychopath.

Bea thought what Levi meant by "self-evident" was that a clue leading to another clue might be in plain sight.

Tate was a game player and seemed unable to stop playing games.

"Don't overlook anything. Any scratch in the wall or loose screw needs to be documented," she told the local police who had fanned out. "You never know where any one thing will lead," she said. "There are simple lines that become arrows of direction if you stare at them long enough," she

said. "Noise becomes signal, and gibberish becomes code when viewed through the right filter."

The team should have gone back and retrieved proper evidence bags for their treasure hunt. This would have been the correct procedure. The problem was the entire universe had taken on an evanescent feel of late. Even Beatrice felt it. As if the walls and indeed the earth that the walls rested on were made of sugar and could melt at any moment. They felt a true sense of urgency to finish their work inside here. Something crucial was missing from this place, an element that guaranteed it would remain standing past the hour. Being in its midst inspired raw dread. The team felt the need to hurry it up. They wanted to be rid of this place before it had the chance to transmogrify into something more monstrous than it was now.

She realized that Levi wouldn't automatically discourage this rushed investigative technique. It would lead to mistakes in judgment which in turn would lead to greater dependency on Tate in finding the right answers. He could tell the truth while being completely mystifying to investigators. On this case months might stretch into years. A lynch mob eventually follow them from town to town. They would have to provide a security agent for every investigator. They would spend most of their time trying to keep Tate alive rather than discovering evidence of who he killed.

Within Levi's presence an investigator needed to withdraw, to center himself and decouple every word from the emotional charge it packed. With Tate the facts were impeccable. It was the emotional implications that misled. These dwelt below like a hidden root system. Within this layer each word needed to be taken literally, cleansed of all suggestion. Words needed to be interpreted like a computer interpreted the world. The lesson Tate

was continually imparting to those in his orbit was the irrationality of humans. If only they would listen he might conclude his lecture prematurely. He considered other men's delusions proof of their decadence. He couldn't see how corrupt he truly was. He was blind to his own workings like a machine was blind to its workings. He felt himself above the fray. but he was an all-too-human human.

In Levi Tate's presence a man needed to close his eyes and open them as slowly as he might to reset his mental landscape completely.

"It's self-evident because it's out in the open," Bea said to herself after performing just this exercise on herself. She had her head tilted back staring up at the shafts of circular light streaming down from each of the missile silos. In a functioning base, these silos would be the sole area of concern for those charged with maintaining the base. In a way, *the missiles* were the caterpillar in the chrysalis. Upon hearing nature's call, they flew away. The structure the team had wandered into was merely the exhaust pit. Likely, only maintenance staff had been intended to walk down here. The real action took place floors above. At least one silo had metal stairs circling around it. Likely these were only half-completed. Bea didn't see the place where the stairs curved into a hidden stairwell just off the silo.

She stared into the light of one silo and wondered where they emerged. Were they just holes in the ground that nobody had covered up for decades on end? It must have been in a place so remote that nobody would complain. Or a private bit of land immune to foot traffic.

Jumping off a short embankment, Agent Ng walked directly underneath the nearest silo.

From this angle she could see that the light was dappled, infiltrated with various figures in the silo's

center. They, the victims of Levi Tate, swung lightly on the ropes that they were strung up on, pushed this way and that by infiltrating breezes from above or below. In this one silo Bea Ng saw three but it could have been more. She needed to know for sure.

To Levi Tate: "How many are there? How many should we expect to find?"

Levi Tate looked at her. "How many dead?" he asked her. "Or how many altogether?"

For the first time she was at a temporary loss for words in front of him.

"How many...altogether," she said.

"Ten bodies," he said, "and then there's another one."

"Still alive? By you?"

"Naturally, dear ghost," Levi Tate said. He laughed, revealing black teeth below. "Who else are we talking about here?"

She moved to the second silo, then the third. One of the shapes dappled the sunlight. A decomposed arm was barely visible from eight stories below.

"Medical evac," Agent Bea Ng cried to no one in particular. "We need a chopper at these GPS coordinates. Then while others stared at her she wheeled around the room and looked for a stairwell.

"Which way up?" she said to Levi Tate, her voice taking on a strange thin quality.

"Bend down," he said to her, "and I'll whisper it in your ear."

Devoid of a choice she did as she was told. Then halfway through his talk to her Agent Ng began to scream.

Chapter Four: The Beloved Community

I.

Crying *Oh, mamma, mamma, please don't tear; don't rip* on her deathbed, a Shaker sister in Sister Jane's dream revealed a set of conical teeth. All incisors these, no grinders. The rest of her was buried in wool blankets piled atop a straw mattress that was infiltrated by the secretions of the dying.

Calling out *A Boy has never wept...nor dashed a thousand kim*, the Shaker sister seemed to have lost her mind already.

"May Jesus take you and keep you from harm," Sister Jane told the creature and made the sign of the cross in front of her. Even in a dream this was a heretical act for a Shaker. Eventually, she would have to perform penance for it. That is, if she recalled it upon waking. It was a demonstration of faithlessness on her part, a falling back on dogmatic Catholic ritual. She might have thought deep down ordinary prayer was not enough. She might have thought if just for a moment that Jesus Christ didn't love her as much as the Good Book claimed He had.

Jane didn't think the dying sister had saw her make the sign, and certainly not the eyeless pope Urban II at the bed's front crossing himself constantly, spastically as if compelled to do so by hidden forces.

Urban II seemed altogether in a worse state than the serpent-like sister who was lying there under layers of blankets spouting carious nonsense.

You can play jacks, and girls do that with a soft ball and do tricks with it. Oh, Oh, dog Biscuit, and when he is happy he doesn't get snappy.

Sister Jane looked around waiting for another visual cue. Perhaps she was in the wrong dream. Was that possible? Could a person wander into or be directed toward another person's symbolic vision? She thought perhaps not. But, then again, her college days were long behind her. The entirety of her worldview was now formed by the Good Book and The Shaker Compendium, the more or less handbook for the UNITED SOCIETY OF BELIEVERS IN CHRIST'S SECOND APPEARING of which she at age twenty-seven was the second youngest member. No books were banned here per se, but she didn't read books. She thought she could only be in one place at one time intellectually. She had no desire to live in the present or the officially approved past. She saw all Catholic ritual as a conspiracy of the church to place itself between God and His worshipers. She saw herself as liberated in a way both modern people and mainstream Christians could never be regardless of how much things were explained to them.

She assumed that the Serpent Sister was an effect of her own weakening faith, an image of temptation reconfigured as an image of decay. Then again, perhaps this was all a mistake. This dream was merely the collective memory of many Shaker dreams. It arose from spiritual crises over the span of centuries. Such dark religious visions worked that way perhaps. They left a stain on the world after their creation. So, they could be re-vivified by someone else centuries later, perhaps inadvertently. A person would wake up in another

person's mind. In so doing the line between her identity and someone else's would disappear. As had been intended all this time by the Lord Almighty.

"What sort of relief can I give you, Sister?" Jane asked the nightmarish vision on display before her. "How can I ease your suffering?"

The Serpent Sister's conical teeth were set in a mouth far too wide to conform to ordinary human anatomy. Her enormous jaw, furthermore, seemed detachable like a boa constrictor's. The entire apparatus resembled the bioengineering required of a creature designed to swallow infants whole.

On her hands and knees, Sister Jane approached the fetid bed.

"What is it that's got you to this place?" she asked the creature. "Is it death you long for? What is you wish for me and all those others who come before or after me into this room?"

On the other side of the bed, Urban II responded to these questions by unhinging his own jaw. A mass of blue-black dirt poured out just before the enormous red earthworms that dwelt in it. Some of the worms clung to the pope's face as well as the thick black callous under Urban's lower lip as they emerged from the mouth. A single worm was attempting to crawl up his right nostril as Sister Jane turned away. She didn't wait for the dirt to stop. She turned away and closed her eyes. She assumed there was more of the same coming. She assumed the pile would rise until it covered Urban's face. And the worms would not stop until they found the meal they were after.

Hey, Jimmie! The Chimney Sweeps. Talk to the Sword, the Serpent Sister said. Talk to the Sword, Talk to the Sword, Talk to the Sword!

II.

For hours on end seemingly she stayed like that. She was afraid about what came next.

As ever, at four thirty in the morning, Sister Jane rose from her bunk and dressed in the communal area. She had several chores to complete before preparing the chapel for morning prayer. The morning prayer started promptly at five. Sister Jane needed to stoke the fires and put the bread out for first meal. The first meal was taken promptly at five-thirty. She needed to broom the woodshop and check the mouse traps therein. The woodshop opened promptly at five forty-five.

It was twelve degrees below zero as she strode the path that led from bunkhouse to chapel. Believing somehow, perhaps because of the chthonian vision experienced in the night, that it was slightly warmer, she left her coat behind. She warmed herself wrapping her arms around her. She breathed in through her nose and felt the inside of it go numb. She saw this erroneously as a purgative act as if cold germs might be killed by the frigid air. The opposite might well have been the case, however. She never polled an elder if they knew. The cold couldn't hurt a body that quickly she didn't think. It couldn't make a person shrivel up immediately like had happened every now and again to a newborn calf in winter once free of the placenta.

Whenever this happened members would bury the corpse on un-sacred ground just outside the village. This was the sort of superstitious practice the Shaker's founder Mother Ann discouraged. Over time the community's faith had become frayed. They started seeing signs in the simplest of

occurrences. They had stopped trusting in providence long ago. They had stopped believing faith alone would provide prophesy. They had started seeking evidence of His Will in nature's cruelest acts.

A viper-bit moose once had wandered in from the surrounding woods and became increasingly agitated as the venom took hold of its mind.

"An image of the end is amongst us," eighty-year-old Brother Samuel told those gathered on the bunkhouse's front porch as the moose placed its head to the earth. Soon it began to move in circles using its antlers as a fulcrum, sending out pathetic bellows as it died. According to Samuel, this was the sound Gabriel's horn would make when announcing Judgment Day. The moose was in the compound for a reason. As they all were. Members should repent now and be free of sin. The message being communicated to them was that Mother Ann's usual remedies were insufficient. The Judgment Day was nigh and they would all be judged then damned. They were all rife with sin. They all needed to be cleansed as much as they could before standing in judgment before the law.

Samuel was admitting his lack of faith in Ann Lee's vision. But old as he was his apostacy was ignored. Members saw him as dotty and withered. They saw such utterances as a lamentation of age more than a challenge to prevailing doctrine.

Shaker adherents met twice a day in unadorned meeting houses. Services ended by gathering in the room's center and dancing in a circle. It was in this place that the Lord would enter worshipper's bodies and shake the sin from them. Well, it had to be this way. Any damned fool could come to Sabbath Day Lake, Maine and see that the Lord was with them. There was a tranquility to this place that spoke of holiness. Once becoming used to the routine nobody

pined nor suffered. Happiness was the fate of all who decided to stay. Sister Jane didn't think this was accomplished by a mass delusion originated by Satan.

When Jane came here the first time, she stayed ten days and left. She returned four months later and stayed for good. In the outside world she had been experiencing daily dreams about the meeting room. She saw herself in the circle's center transformed. She saw Jesus in the circle's mid-point with his hands held up as if to render a blessing.

In the dream, Jesus' face was obscured by something indefinite but real.

"If I could just stare into his eyes for a time I'd know His Will," Sister Jane said to the community's elder, Mother Lucy, when sitting with her in the dining hall after the third instance of the vision. She assumed Christ's Face was intentionally being kept from her as a type of punishment. She assumed once some manner of grace was achieved, she would be allowed to peek behind the veil. But she couldn't be granted grace when Christ was not revealing the motives behind his appearance. Jesus had wanted something from her obviously. But up until now he hadn't revealed exactly what it was.

On this large oak table that one of the First Believers had carved at the advent of the nineteenth century, Mother Lucy's hands were jumpy with palsy.

"You do not ask Jesus for guidance, sister," Lucy said to Jane and stared at her through a milky veil of cataracts. "He is not a filling station attendant there to provide information. He provides Love, rather. Which is the epitome of self-fulfillment. Once you know Him you will know the truth," she said. "Veil and all."

Jane called it a veil but it was really a haze of something firmly alive. And, therefore, to an

ordinary human slightly disgusting. This sense of disgust she assumed as another tribulation that Jesus had burdened her with. Perhaps it was the reason the veil existed. Perhaps every object in the universe was allayed against her and her chance at happiness.

The “spirit communication” Mother Lucy was having Sister Jane create at the table would go into the *Book of Testimony* Lucy kept by her bedside. Nearly two hundred years old, the *Book of Testimony* was stuffed with over a thousand drawings testifying to Shaker visions. Read front to back it constituted what Mother Ann conceived of as the community’s one true history. The facts attached to a person were unhelpful when trying to learn her secrets. Her visions were all that matter.

Jesus spoke in visions, not language. A true Christian’s soul was not in her brain but somewhere else. There was no name for the organ. It was impossible to see or to measure or weigh.

In Jane’s drawing, the veil of Jesus was rendered with opaque charcoal.

“But I don’t think it’s the right color,” she said to Mother Lucy. “Not even close.”

Mother Lucy looked through the world these days through the milky residue of cataracts. So, she was no help in this matter.

“Whatever color the Spirit of Christ is, child, is the color you will choose,” she said to Jane simply. “If your heart is open, the hand of the Lord will guide you,” she said. “It is not for you to decide or judge.”

But could Jesus be two different colors at once? She wondered if this was possible. And if He could what meaning was there in his apparition? Jesus became human after all, so that other humans might learn from his example. But what knowledge could be drawn from He that was inexplicable? That

God was all-powerful, and His Will was unknowable? The same thing could be said about nature if you were willing to assign nature such a trivial attribute as consciousness. Jane would just assume worship a tornado than an inexplicable God. In a way, God must humble Himself so that men and women could worship Him. Could it be that the spirit Mother Lucy was alluding to had made a mistake? Or perhaps her dream vision was not inspired by Jesus but the Devil. She thought this somehow was the likeliest of possibilities. There were so many supernatural forces set against her and she didn't know why. She didn't know what her role was in any of this. She didn't know why she didn't just kill herself and get it over with.

This had taken place in the awful winter of 1962 when she was but two years in the Community. Presently it was 1967 and she felt only slightly less melancholy about her time spent on earth. She didn't see the point in loving a faceless God. As any creature without a face was incapable of loving someone back. For years this thought had been subsumed by the Shaker routine. But her vision of the Serpent Sister had called out to her. Her spirit communication was empty of all meaning. It was only in dreams where the truth was communicated to her. It didn't matter whether it emanated from Christ or the Devil. Maybe Christ and the Devil were two aspects of the same entity. This was an extreme conviction but maybe they were. She had a sense that the Serpent Sister and the vision of years before were different branches off the same tree. The spastic Pope Urban, however, she had no feeling for whatsoever. She had been a lapsed Catholic prior to acceptance into the Community. He knew Urban II by reputation from her history classes. In a way he might have been as much a victim as she was. This might have been his dream,

emanate from the horrid twelfth century that she had stumbled into by accident. Urban was on his deathbed and being dragged to hell. The sister's utterances were a veiled attempt at high spirited humor. She was more serpent than human, so she struggled with the words. But, realize, friends: *Boy has never wept...nor dashed a thousand kim.*

Realize that when they shot poor Dutch Schultz in that New Jersey Chop House in 1935, the ambulance was late arriving. Ordinary people wanted nothing to do with him. They didn't want to get involved.

"He was the American Christ, Sister, the only hope any of us had for transcendence," the Sabbath Day Lake Mailman, Ronnie Szot, told Sister Jane. He meant every word he said. Of course he did. He was a Mainer through and through. Which meant that he was incapable of irony. If he was capable of irony he would have kept it under his hat. An expert in all gangland matters, Ronnie Szot knew of what he spoke. He had written six books on the subject all of which were unpublished. He had written one giant tome on Dutch Schultz' death and his last words.

Dutch was the American Christ attempting a comeback, but he had all this lead in his lungs and stomach and liver that hindered the operation. He had wanted to do good but only did bad. It wasn't his fault. He had been distracted and tempted. He always had good intentions, but he never managed to turn the corner and start thinking of others as he once thought of himself. He was the American Christ and, therefore, a Failed Christ. As America was a failed Heaven, a tragic City on a Hill that had been sacked and looted long ago.

"Only Jesus can redeem you in the end, sister," Ronnie Szot said. But America's Jesus, Dutch Schultz, redeemed nothing before he died. He

simply hadn't gotten around to it. He thought his time on earth infinite perhaps. He was surprised as anybody when Mendy's gangsters busted in while he was taking a piss. They shot him and shot him and shot him and left him slumped over the urinal. Not even his mother finally would say pleasant things about him. Didn't Dutch deserve our prayers at least? Even him? He was for the most part the gentlest of gangsters. Everybody Dutch Schultz shot had it coming to them. With one or two crucial exceptions, all those he beat with an iron bar were worthy of being beat with an iron bar. He was a profoundly unsentimental man.

Minutes after the service, Sister Jane had come to this rural post office on the other side of the lake to retrieve the community's correspondence. She didn't wish to make small talk with Ronnie as it was against her creed. But being impolite to others was against her creed, too.

When prodded by Ronnie, Sister Jane began to describe her dream vision to him in detail. The details of the bedroom she had entered and the one utterance of the Serpent Sister, *A Boy has never wept...nor dashed a thousand kim*, had been repeated to Ronnie.

He knew immediately that the utterance's author was none other than the gangster Dutch Schultz.

"When they shot him, they took him to the hospital and he began to sing," Ronnie Szot said of the Savior that Failed. "And so, he began to sing, to compose just as the First Jesus did. It was his last testimony and his Sermon on the Mount," Ronnie Szot told her and shifted his weight briefly off his prosthetic right foot. Lost the real one did he on Omaha Beach when a mine tripped. This was the least of Ronnie Szot's troubles. He also had piles, genital warts, early-stage cirrhosis, and a

misdiagnosed temporal lobe epilepsy whose symptomology was attributed to shell shock from The War. His spirit had longed ago flown from the indignities of the body. It now dwelt skyward in the fecund bosom of God. He was basically a zombie most of the day who was able to abide only because of the isolation he found himself in. He lived behind the post office and operated the station by himself. Hours at the desk by himself, his eyes would roll up into his skull and he would be gone. Only a familiar face such as the Shaker Sister Jane could rouse him from trance. Then his angelic soul would fly from the eight-titted God and descend. On this occasion he was desperate to provide Jane answers. The End was Nigh, and the good Shakers of Sabbath Day Lake needed to be relieved. They had spent too much time on the watchtower's parapet by themselves. They were a dying community (though this might have been vigorously disputed by them). Sister Jane's vision had been Ronnie Szot's vision communicated at a distance. She needed to be warned, to be transformed from she who was condemned to she who was saved. The American Christ had died but his acolytes lived on. Jane needed to be told that she was barking up the wrong tree spiritually. She needed to be granted relief from her suffering. God answered no prayers nowadays. There was one Christian, and he died in a New Jersey prison hospital surrounded by Irish detectives put off their mash by the sight before them. Slaves of the Pope, they were unwilling to countenance the notion that the monstrous vision before them was a holy monstrous vision.

Ronnie Szot had dreamt of the American Christ's words and the Serpent Sister had dutifully repeated them, completely unaware of what she was saying.

"The cops made a transcript of Dutch's words to hold it against him," Ronnie told Sister Jane as he

made ready with the Community's parcels. Most of them contained medications designed to alleviate the pain of the Great Transition from animate to inanimate objects. They were a graying, isolated lot the Shakers of Sabbath Day Lake, Maine. Full of the Lord, they were blind to this reality. Mirrors were not allowed in the community. Members didn't know how withered they had become isolated from their reflections.

In the police transcript, Dutch's message to the masses was relayed with the firm intensity of coppers who glimpse a meaningful pinch nearby.

"Communitistic...strike...baloney," Ronnie quoted from this newest of testaments. He saved the interpretation for later.

"Honestly this is a habit I get; sometimes I give it and sometimes I don't."

According to Rev. Szot, the dying gangster Dutch Schultz was articulating the need for the human heart to open in a fundamental way.

"He was telling Americans to forego the temptations of socialism," Ronnie told her. "In the second stanza he was admitting that he too was tempted occasionally. Dutch gave into that temptation every now and again. For example, he joined a criminal gang. He engaged in projects intended for only criminal gain. His heart was impure and could only be cleansed through a rejection of that lifestyle he had indulged in."

Sister Jane had never heard of Dutch Schultz. She assumed Ronnie Szot's obsession with him was further proof of his insanity. Dedicated Child of Christ that she was, she didn't look beneath the superficial designation that an at-root cruel society had assigned him. Ronnie was one more country crank as far as Sister Jane was concerned. She couldn't be bothered to notice the imploring tone he used with her, even though such a tone was odd for

a mere schizophrenic. Generally crazy people realized the worthless nature of their own testimony and adjusted accordingly. They generally didn't insist on the veracity of their experience. They saw what they saw but realized its faultiness. Thus, they were anguished constantly. Sepsis poured from their brains and announced itself as holy vision. Whereas Ronnie Szot was utterly secure about his testimony's veracity. You could shove bamboo shoots under his fingernails, and he wouldn't recant. He was surer about his Christ than Sister Jane was about hers. But, of course, as of 1962, this was saying precious little.

Ronnie's last exhortation to Jane was spoken on her way out the post office.

"Please be on the lookout for false prophets," Ronnie told her. "I follow the war from the radio reports," he said broaching the subject of the Vietnam Conflict for the first time in Jane's presence. "And I can tell you that America absolutely is doomed to lose it. As war is a spiritual conflict as much as a game of land acquisition. We in the spiritual communities of Maine, sister, understand this implicitly. But the generals in Saigon understand not at all. They will lose and will be forever ignorant as to the reasons behind their defeat. The light of freedom, of God's spirit that is, is with the Viet Cong alone. America will be defeated and in the misery of defeat false prophets will arise. You are God-hungry, sister, and thus especially susceptible. But recall please: Christ has descended on this world twice already and we are still not free of sin. How much good do you think a third time will do? You should stop waiting around for His Return. You are presently keeping your eyes towards heaven and away from Vietnam. I don't believe this approach will help any of us. As we are far closer to Vietnam than heaven presently. One

realm has immense importance, and the other doesn't."

In fact, Jane hadn't read so much as a newspaper article about the war or heard a radio report. It wasn't out of indifference for her fellow Americans, of course, but out of fealty to her church. She understood only vaguely why newspapers were banned. She agreed with what Ronnie Szot said. This didn't mean she would ever take any action to inform herself. She was serene in her ignorance. She assumed such ignorance as vaguely sinful, but she couldn't find a church elder who would endorse this opinion.

Mother Lucy had long since departed this vale of tears and Mother Louise had been elected. Louise, in contrast to Lucy, had a reputation for strictness even amongst the Shakers. It would have been unthinkable for Sister Jane to poll her on the need to open the Beloved Community to the world. If only for the sake of those dying in Vietnam, the subject still wouldn't have been broached. Discussing Vietnam would have been cause for banishment as far as Mother Lousie saw it. She deeply believed that a Shaker's eyes belonged on the onrushing Kingdom of God alone. Besides, what would the Community do once they "discussed" the war? Should they join up with the protest movement? Should they trade in their handmade clothes for jeans and dashikis and move to centers of political dissent? Mother Louise would immediately see the request as a slippery slope. At best she would see that it was beside the point. After all, there was a sure way to peace on earth which was to walk in Jesus' footsteps daily. She didn't see how a person became peaceful through protest. Protest was a sure way to engender misunderstanding amongst others. It led to anger which led to sinful thoughts. And thus ensured damnation.

On her next visit to the post office, Sister Jane would ask Ronnie Szot to bring several newspapers with him so she could learn how the war effort was progressing. Ronnie claimed it was a lost cause. But maybe this was him being over-dramatic.

Jane didn't care who won or who lost. She thought the entire war effort was ill-conceived. After all, what sort of belligerence had North Vietnam demonstrated toward the United States? She thought such intervention was an overreach. She was worried that the war's planners were incompetent. They couldn't be trusted to report faithfully on their progress. In the end the War would be lost because they had not adequately conditioned the American people to the price that must be paid for victory.

The path back to Sabbath Day Lake was a six-hundred-yard macadam road presently covered by a patina of snow.

"Sometimes things work out for themselves, sometimes they don't," Sister Jane said to herself when seeing the bearded figure in green camouflage straddling the path a hundred yards ahead. Heavy with the leather sack she carried the community's mail in, Jane assumed for herself only a small chance of making it back to Ronnie's post office if she decided to make a run for it. She had never been especially fast and who knew what sort of athletic feats this bearded youth was capable? He had shown himself to her. Which perhaps meant that he thought he had the upper hand already. He had obviously been tracking her from the surrounding woods on her way here. His intentions, therefore, could be taken as predatory. At any point he could have walked over to the community greeting house and introduced himself. He wanted something, however, from Sister Jane in particular. This was an extremely bad sign. He had been

waiting until she was properly isolated. And who knew how many days he had been here waiting in the bitter cold and watching?

One of Mother Ann Lee's great teachings was that Jesus Christ could return at any time and in any form. Thus, it was imperative to take in every stranger who asked for it. This could be a test of faith. The Lord Jesus Christ could be residing just behind the stranger's bloodshot eyes perhaps. Deep down, Sister Jane was skeptical that this was the case. We were not God's prey after all but God's children. Deep down Jane felt a superbeing like Jesus would at least summon the decorum of RSVPing in advance.

There was nothing for Sister Jane to do now but approach the bearded stranger with an offer of unlimited hospitality on the part of the Shaker Community. She would intimate that this path was extremely well-traveled. She would tell the young man that two Community brothers would be along within a few minutes. And then she would say offhandedly how strange it was that the human voice carried so well out here. A single shout would be enough to summon three or four community members quickly.

The closer the stranger came, the greater was Sister Jane's trepidation.

"You look like days between a warm bed," she told the young man, noting the tiny icicles hanging off his scraggly beard. Since sunrise, the temperature had warmed up to six above. Jane wasn't particularly cold, but she had slept indoors in a warm room. She assumed the cold was enough to kill. She assumed also it would drive the heartiest of outdoorsmen in search of warm spaces.

He was threadbare, this young man. He had a wool jacket zipped up over several other lumpy layers that added heft to a skeletal frame. The holes

in his blue jeans revealed knobby knees gone red because of direct contact with the cold. He had a wool hat and gloves with the fingers cut out of them. For obvious reasons he kept his hands in his pockets. Every so often he would remove them to blow on them to restart the circulation. He was not prepared for Maine in January obviously. If he came here, he came in a hurry, without aforethought. Any more exposure to the cold and select parts of him would start to fall off. As if a loose collection of unrelated parts dropping off each other in a mystical sequence.

The young man had a placid expression that somehow hinted at a boiling turmoil just below. As if his face was the skin on thick soup being slowly brought to boil.

I AM A TRAVELER JUST LIKE YOU

he “said” to Jane through the medium of a plastic three by five card produced with difficulty from one wool jacket pocket. He turned the card over to reveal the famous insignia for the *New York Institute of the Deaf*. The insignia was of a person devoid of both ears and a mouth.

The young man flipped the card back and pointed to its fine print. It said something to the effect the bearer of this card was a deaf-mute. It said that the bearer of this card would be communicating primarily through the aegis of the deck that the NYID supplied all its graduates with.

DON'T ATTEMPT TO FIND OUT IF I CAN HEAR PLEASE

a second card produced with shivering hands advised Jane.

***YOU WILL ONLY EMBARRASS YOURSELF IN THE
ATTEMPT***

Sister Jane held the card up in the brilliant sunlight that a frigid day in Maine produced.

"What are you doing out here?" she asked the mute stranger slowly. Perhaps he could read lips. If he couldn't, at least he would be aware Jane had taken an interest in him. She wasn't rejecting him immediately based on his shambolic appearance. She wasn't simply trying to find a way past him to leave him to the elements.

He seemed a stranger up from Boston. Maybe he had decided to hitchhike but found the rides drying up this far north. Maybe there was a relative nearby that he had decided to visit but had a falling out. Something like that. Whichever, he was in desperate circumstances. Dressed like he was, he surely couldn't survive another night out in the woods. Apart from the post office, the nearest village was the town of Pelham sixteen miles south. Sunset was around four pm. If the stranger walked briskly he might make it before dark. But he had no money obviously to secure him lodgings once he arrived. He did not seem the sort who have someone he could send a telegram to have money wired to him.

Jane assumed that he had come up here with the intention of finding shelter with the Shakers.

"Do you need a place to stay?" she asked the stranger mouthing the words wide and slow.

After he nodded yes, the bearded stranger ran back into the woods to retrieve his canvas duffle bag. Strange that having sat out in the snow its exterior was entirely dry. Perhaps he had used it as a blanket to get through the night. Maybe there was a plastic tarp inside the forest shadows that she had not been able to identify.

III.

It was Shaker custom and law to take in every stranger who asked.

"That's why we situate ourselves in the middle of nowhere," Brother Eli told Sister Jane several hours after her return. Jane was gathering sticks in the woodshop while watching the creation of a chair. Brother Eli had the second most tenure at Sabbath Day Lake. He could build chairs like this one blindfolded.

Eli, who had been a Catskills comic in the nineteen forties, could always be counted on to make such jokes in the face of the spiritual dread that seemed undying at Sabbath Day Lake.

"I don't think he's a thief," Eli said to Sister Jane about the stranger. "Because, I mean, look around. Any real thief worth his salt would look around and head in the other direction straight off," he said. "He'd feel bad and steal something *for* us not from us," he said. "He'd come to see us like the renunciates we are. There's nothing here for anybody with any sort of worldly ambition," Eli said. "So, I gather he is exactly who he seems to be. That is, a supremely troubled young man. He's running away from something, that's all we know," he said. "I mean, he's lucky to be alive," he said to her. "Such a person is motivated more by fear than hope. I doubt he would be aware of our creed let alone of our location. He doesn't seem cunning enough to come to us willingly. Not that it would matter regarding our attitude to him, but he doesn't seem the type to scheme. I mean, he didn't have to wait in the woods like that, did he? Could have come right up to the shop's door and knocked. There is no need to be deceitful in a godly community like ours. We're as guileless as dogs. Like dogs we'll love you no matter what you do to us and then some."

The chair Eli was making had no title nor official use as per the Shaker abhorring of all marketing. Downstream it would likely be sold as part of a kitchen ensemble. A straight oak and iron confection that would because of its impeccable craftsmanship outlive all other items in a house, the house's residents included. Brother Eli had made several thousand chairs just like this one in his eighteen years at the Community. He didn't see them as physical objects so much as strangely solid affectations of his mind. Somehow, he thought about furniture pieces merely and they appeared. He wasn't aware anymore of the physical processes that brought the chair into being. It was all too repetitious, too rote for him to notice. He supposed he was at work now, he supposed Sister Jane was with him. This was bliss, he supposed: a permanent state of autopilot where only the Holy Spirit was focused upon, was fretted over, was dreamed of when it came time to dream. This was the state all Shaker members aspired to according to Mother Lucy (Mother Louise was perniciously silent on the subject). The idea that a person could walk with Jesus at all hours of the day was thrilling to she who was in search of God. The routine numbed until it liberated, according to Lucy. There would be ecstasy encountered through the vapidness of the experience. That was the theory, anyway. Sometimes it worked and sometimes it didn't. Seven years in, Jane had yet to get past the vapid part. She suspected deep down she was wired differently than Brother Eli. She suspected she would be dead before the unveiled Christ came to her in a friendly way and offered moral guidance.

The link between one vision and another of that day, between the Serpent Sister and the Silent Brother were inescapable to Jane.

"What do you think God is trying to tell me?" she asked Eli having recapped both visions into a single narrative. She did this to eliminate the possibility of coincidence. "Looking at what happened," she said, granting that her dream was a physical event, "what path do you think I should take? Where is all this going? And if this stranger should make improper demands of me, how should I answer?"

Brother Eli was no theologian.

"Did you ask Mother Louise about this?" he asked her. "She's the one who receives the transmissions, supposedly," he said, fixing a slat in place. "Which is Shaker dogma. We're not supposed to have dogma, us Shakers, but there it is. The one in charge is the one in the know. Supposedly it's all Christ-ordained," he said. "But you can read scripture until your eyes fall out and not find it. 'The one in charge is the one in the know.' I mean, Shakespeare said it best when he said 'to thine own heart be true.' That ain't scripture either, of course. But one of these we live by and one of these we don't. It doesn't make any sense but there it is. We Shakers adhere to the path of the meek out of force of habit. It's hard to think this was what God had intended for us all."

Redoubtable Mother Louise when asked by Sister Jane for guidance would no doubt aver that she should trust in the Lord. It was just a way of shutting Jane up. If she had a secret that Jesus had told her she wouldn't have shared it with Jane. She likely saw herself as a middle manager more than a spiritual guide. She had no real reason for being here and assumed the same was true with everybody else.

Strange to say it but the chair Eli was in the midst of constructing was not coming together as effortlessly as would have been the case only yesterday.

"It's difficult to say what's happening," he said to Jane when asked how come. For some reason the various pieces were arriving off the workbench mismatched. Eli's eyes seemed ever resolute as before. For some reason the results of perfect measurements were off. It was as if the wood had been granted the sudden ability to shrink and grow. For some reason he was constantly having to recycle the slats as scrap and take out his oil crayon once more.

Could have been old age sinking in. But, as per Brother's Eli's jibe, he had been old long before it became an object of conversation.

"It's just part of life's strangeness," he told her. "The things that don't make sense. You can't think about them logically, so you forget all about them. It's just the way the mind works, Sister. Holy visions occur to common folk constantly. But they are forgotten because they are so strange. God, I think, after a fashion is strange. When the true Christ reappears, I think he will be speaking in a tongue with which no one is familiar. You will see him and run the other way. You will think him more a demon than savior. And this is doubly true, I suspect, amongst the faithful."

Brother Eli's hands shook when he reapplied the oil crayon to the wood slab.

"Religion's a dirty business," he told her. "Not for faint of heart."

He gripped the hand saw carefully and placed it exactly at the center of the line he had just made.

"Now," he said to her, "can you imagine me cutting through the fingers on one hand?"

Sister Jane closed her eyes and admitted that this was what she had been dreading all along.

"Dreading what? The fact that I will cut through them or I won't?" Brother Eli was smiling when he said this.

"The fact that you'll try and fail," she said to him. "And I'll have to do the Lord's work for you. And find some place to toss the fingers when I'm done."

Sister Jane looked out the window long enough to see Mother Louise moving from the second bunkhouse where the day's stranger was quartered. She was gripping one of his deaf-mute three by five cards in her pale right hand. She had a look on her face that Jane couldn't read completely from this distance but registered with her as strange.

Later in the dining hall the mute stranger as was Shaker custom sat at the head of the table.

"We are all so happy to have you," Mother Louise said and presented him with a pad and pen. Maybe this was what they had been discussing earlier in the day. Louise was thorough in that way at least with guests. Saw 'em as potential recruits maybe. Or perhaps she was just a hospitable soul.

Jane had read somewhere that deaf people or at least those deaf from birth generally weren't taught to read and write English.

"Has he communicated anything to you?" Sister Jane asked Mother Louise wondering if perhaps she was honoring a request in giving him the pen and pad.

As ever whenever a community member spoke out of turn, Mother Louise ignored the utterance.

"Do not put yourself out on our behalf," Louise said to the stranger after a while. She could see the strange look come over his face when the pen and pad had been presented to him. As if something was expected from him that he either did not understand or understood but could not fulfill. Several minutes into the meal the stranger removed the pen's cap and began what seemed like doodling to Sister Jane. Several minutes later, he couldn't be

roused from his labors. He was drawing and writing on multiple pieces of paper.

Mother Louise explained to the Shakers that the young man was from a deaf facility in New York State. Opposed to the war, and, even though he was exempt from the draft, he was headed to Canada, to the Maritimes to find work on a fishing boat. He had started out walking and underestimated the New England winter. He thought himself completely normal in all other aspects. He claimed expertise in so many trades including carpentry and welding. He claimed to be in possession of a religious mindset though Louise had not yet wheedled a denomination from him.

"He sees himself as a true believer," Louise said admiringly then adjusted her dentures to eliminate the slurring of words. "Somebody whose life is filled to brim with God."

How all this could be communicated to Mother via the clumsy cards, Sister Jane could not guess. She assumed she was filling in the blanks for the stranger, taking a general utterance and creating a life utterance around it. This was strange behavior coming from a deeply religious woman who, Jane might have thought, would have had more fealty to the truth. Shakers by and large weren't practiced in the art of public relations. They certainly didn't make things up. Usually, the outside world was held at arm's length. Usually, they were wary of the corruption being spread by an outsider. They welcomed strangers even as they quarantined them. For some reason this stranger was different. Mother felt an affinity for him. Though it was obvious that he didn't return the favor.

Strange that after bathing he seemed even filthier to Jane than when she first encountered him on the lake path.

"What are his plans for us, I wonder," Jane said to Brother Eli on the tenth day after the silent stranger's arrival. It was obvious that, unlike so many others who had passed through he had no intention of going anywhere. Usually various suppliants or curiosity-seekers had their fill of austere Sabbath Day Lake within a week. It was the ministrations to the frozen outhouse involving a pickaxe that usually performed the trick nicely, she found. Primitive living was not suited for those who were accustomed to indoor plumbing. More than the austerity of the community was the persistent cold it was wrapped in for five months out of the year. Even native Mainers once they found the means to do so would head south. Vacationers usually stuck to ski slopes up near Arcadia. Only some especially hearty Quebecois would venture into the woods after November. They too within several days were offended by the community's rough circumstances and left quickly. Sabbath Day Lake was a far better ideal than physical location. Mosquitos in summer, for example, existed that would form themselves into a handprint on the other side of the window's netting after a palm had been placed there for four seconds. To live here was a calling, not an adventure. Extreme nature knocked the stuffing out of adventure in short order.

To Jane, the silent stranger seemed neither an adventurer nor somebody who had heard the Call but something outside ordinary human experience altogether.

"If he was going to Canada," she said to Eli, "why is he dallying here I wonder?"

Perhaps he changed his mind, Eli said, or had his mind changed for him by Mother Louise. She could be very persuasive when her dentures held, according to Eli. In fact, she was the one who recruited him from the Borscht Belt all those

decades back. She promised him a paradise. She promised that the world outside the Community would always be there for him to return to.

Granted he didn't seem a top-level recruit. But, then again, beggars could not be choosers.

The Ohio community is soon to close," he said to Jane while setting the base of yet another non-descript chair. This model had of late become the Community's main source of income. People appreciated the old-style Shaker craftsmanship in these plasticine times. It made them hearken back to an imaginary moment where race riots and body counts were not constantly on the evening news. Most thought Shakers old fashioned, though the Society itself certainly did not see itself that way. Shakers saw themselves as in the spiritual vanguard of humanity. They weren't renunciates in the traditional sense that they believed an ascetic lifestyle led to wisdom. Rather, they were pragmatic in their dealings with the world. They took what they needed from society and politely declined the rest. Other than the need to daily cleanse their souls, they insisted on little.

The real problem with the Shakers was that having adopted celibacy as a practice, the movement couldn't self-perpetuate. Thus, the famous Shaker hospitality was co-mingled with opportunism. They needed people to visit and find the place at least appealing enough to relate its existence to several friends. Mother Louise had a notion to advertise in the local papers and hold furniture making demonstrations. This was a good idea, but it struck Sister Jane as mildly corrupt. Wasn't God supposed to take care of such matters? Wasn't the Divine Hand at work in maintaining the UNITED SOCIETY OF BELIEVERS IN CHRIST'S SECOND APPEARING through millennia? Why were the wizards of Madison Avenue required for so

providential a sustaining as this? The Good Lord took care of those who took care of their own, of course. But shouldn't His Presence be felt more directly than, a positive response for an ad in the back of the local sports section? God was indifferent about for man's desire to see Him but why was He shy? Why would He intentionally try to disguise His True Nature from those who only wanted to love Him? There was no logic to the reticence. Which in a more intellectually engaged person would signal that something was amiss. Perhaps Mother Ann was the mere crank her many detractors made her out to be. Perhaps she had never talked to God in her life. She knew less about God than celibate Brother Eli knew about breast jokes. They were both aliens to their subjects trying to navigate their way with secondhand sources. Their hearts were someplace else likely. They both needed a radical change of profession.

Raising the issue with Mother Louise would have been futile, Sister Jane supposed. She was on thin ice with Mother at the moment even though she didn't know why. Watching Eli work, she wondered vaguely if it was possible for a Shaker to be excommunicated. Likely every church had its system of rewards and punishments. Louise had no grounds really to even accuse Jane. But she was worldly enough in the ways of men to know that it hardly mattered. Once accused she would have some defenders and some detractors. And once she was accused, she would have to decide whether it made sense for her even to defend herself. She might take the accusation as a hint that it was time to leave.

Held with Eli's right hand only, the chair's base kept slipping.

"It's my fault," he said to Jane while attempting to steady it by holding it between his legs. "Ever

since losing these fingers," he said. "I'm all thumbs."

Brother Eli held up his right hand to reveal the missing pinky and stub of a ring finger present. Oh, how many years had it been since he inadvertently sawed through them? For some reason, the event was fuzzy in his mind. He could only place the occurrence in a five-year window. It was sometime between yesterday and The Beatles first LP.

Generally, Eli tried to use his left hand alone for all shop activities. But, bereft of a clamp, this stage of chair production required two hands. He had been meaning to buy a clamp down in Bath, but something had kept blocking him. There was an inescapable conclusion reached that he simply hadn't had the time to do so yet. This was bizarre to him given his radically simple lifestyle. So, he tended to suppress the issue altogether. He usually tried to steady the chair base with his feet. Which was problematic when trying to saw through the same object. If he cut off a toe, he would be no good to anybody until Kingdom Come.

If this kept up, perhaps he would have to retire from the shop altogether or involve himself in less burdensome tasks as the lacquering and packaging of the chairs. The chairs were intended for market in Portland, but some would be redistributed world-wide. Quality would suffer if Eli didn't address his problem. He needed a clamp at minimum to steady the chair's base. Optimally he needed his fingers back.

"Holding his mangled hand up to Sister Jane, Brother Eli said, "All things are God's Will. But in this case, I'm willing to make an exception."

In the winter light that Eli's mangled hand was framed against Jane saw the two missing fingers momentarily reappear.

"It's weird how this worked out for us all," she told Eli then momentarily checked the availability of her own fingers.

Eli wanted to know what Sister Jane meant by "how this all worked out."

"I mean," she said, "We were just discussing this last week, weren't we? You were talking about what if you sawed your fingers off."

Eli told her he didn't recall the conversation. After all, it wouldn't make much sense, would it? Unless he was engaging in the sort of dark humor he foreswore after becoming a Shaker. With dark humor you stated a fact as a hypothetical. But missing fingers were no laughing matter. Especially if they were your fingers.

All around her, ever since the silent stranger's arrival, metaphysical incongruities were making themselves known to Jane. She couldn't say for sure, but she didn't believe the community's main well had been dry for so long. It forced a quarter mile hike each day to the new well to retrieve water. The evergreens around here did not usually wield razor-like pinecones whose innards were infested with small black caterpillars whose secretions were noxious enough to blister skin on first contact. Moreover, Jane didn't think any sort of fir was fecund in winter. She suspected that such fruitfulness was aberrant but elders in the community including Mother Louise had assured this was not the case. "Be attentive child, Christ is everywhere," Mother Louise had scolded Jane when inspecting a pinecone using a thick work glove. According to Louise, such pinecones as these had been around for as long as she had been in the Community. She recalled how during WWII they would grind the caterpillars into a paste and distribute it as an antibiotic to aid in the war effort. They would dry the poultice later and use the

remaining tar as a conjunctivitis treatment. They would spread it with their celibate fingers into the eyes of young children and it would leech the blood from burst capillaries.

There was nothing out of the ordinary in the surrounding woods, she claimed. And besides, even if there was, what caused it? Sister Jane could not believe that they as a community were losing their collective minds. Surely, she did not believe that Jesus had forsaken them. At least not to such a degree that He would allow evil to descend on His most ardent of worshipers.

Madness was the ultimate evil, Mother Louise had once declared, because it obfuscated the glory of God from he who was so afflicted.

"You need to perform penance for that which you have just suggested," Louise said to Sister Jane after handing the pinecone back to her. Held in Louise's ungloved hand, the pinecone's edges had cut into her skin. The caterpillars had emerged from the cone's center and were burrowing into the wounds. As she spoke the agony in Louise's face was apparent. Yet she was still sincere in her claim that nothing was amiss. The Lord of the Universe, Jesus Christ, would see to it that this was the case. At least until the Time of Tribulation all would be as before. This was foretold in *Revelation*. This was God's word and God's word was all that mattered.

After the meeting with Mother, Jane thought that perhaps the Tribulation had begun.

"Part of our trials," Eli had remarked to her when the subject came up, "is not knowing when we are being tested. God intends that we suffer," Eli said. That is the whole point of life. Life is a continuous set of miserable circumstances unto death."

This made perfect sense to Jane. But having been so chastised by Mother she was loath to mention it. So many others did not see anything

wrong in their immediate surroundings. Eventually they would accuse Jane of heresy and ask her to leave. And the problem was that she had nowhere else to go.

A rain, warm as piss, came in the middle of February. It quickly flooded the ground with its remains and melted snow.

On the way to meeting house that morning Sister Jane spied a light emerging from the guesthouse where the silent stranger was situated.

She didn't bother knocking as she assumed a knock would be interpreted as a trick played upon the deaf. For some reason she assumed her unannounced entrance was expected. The silent stranger was a giver of unpleasant surprises, not an acceptor of them. She assumed he knew everything that went on everywhere. She had no reason to suspect that he knew but she did.

In a full lotus, the silent stranger sat on the bunk house's cot watching Jane's approach. The card he gave her contained only a question mark on one side and nothing on the other. He was waiting for her to speak. There was no truth to be spoken that could not await her enlightenment.

She asked him what his intentions were for the universe. He fumbled with the cards momentarily in conveying the answer.

SOMETHING BEAUTIFUL AND TERRIBLE

was what the revealed card said. On the card's back was the image of St. Francis of Assisi preaching to the birds.

Sister Jane asked the stranger when he was going to leave.

YOU'LL LEAVE BEFORE I DO, he told her through the cards. On its other side of this card was a grainy photo of a young woman, naked from the waist up

sprouting angel wings from her shoulder blades. No, not angel wings. On closer inspection they were twin slabs of raw and bleeding meat. In addition, an enormous cylindrical mass was protruding from the young woman's mouth. Perhaps it was made of wood or bone. Whichever, it was causing her enormous pain. It had to have been placed there by force.

On the pen and paper that was held in his lap, the young man had drawn an image of a flying saucer descending from a cloudy sky. Down below the saucer there was a cemetery. It was shown in crosscut with various mutilated bodies in shallow graves.

What would the Lord Jesus Christ have Sister Jane do, she asked him. Or, in other words, why had he come and unfroze the world?

The next card he produced for her had no writing on it, merely a sacrilegious image of a halo-sporting Jesus in a flying saucer staring down at a rice paddy.

God doesn't care about us, the bearded stranger mouthed though she doubtless misinterpreted the phrase. *He is real but He doesn't care*, the young man said once more.

One could no more know the mind of God than the mind of a Humboldt squid. According to the young man, he was merely an effect not the actuator of an ongoing Apocalypse.

CHRIST LOVED US ONCE, BUT NOT ANYMORE

he said through the cards. He turned the card over and pointed outside across to the meeting house. The service was on-going. Mother Louise was witnessed in the center of the window lost in her Shaker dance. Up and down she moved, shake, shake, shake. The fronts of her eyes as usual

revealed only the whites. She too was being unmade by degrees. But this was immaterial to most who bore witness to it. Louise was old and ugly, shrewish in demeanor, and focused on the realization of her own will above God's.

THEY LOVED US ONCE, BUT NOT ANYMORE

Responsive to a silent request, Sister Jane folded the plastic card over and placed it in her mouth and began to chew. From the nearby house she could hear the familiar hymn spoken as they entered God's embrace. The words degenerated as they danced. Soon it was an animal grunting emitted as if in coitus. Soon there was no distinction made between prayer and fucking:

'Tis the gift to be simple (Unnh, unnh, unnh)

'Tis the gift to be free

*'Tis the gift to come down where we ought to be
And when we find ourselves in the place just right (oh
yeah)*

It will be in the valley of love and delight

When true simplicity is gained

To bow and to bend, we will not be ashamed

To turn, turn, will be our delight

'Til by turning, turning, we come round right

Chapter Five: Not Anymore

I.

The truth about Leviticus Tate resided far below the roots of the Tree of Knowledge. It was buried deep beneath the black, fragrant soil of Eden in which the Tree had taken root.

“When were you born?” Agent Beatrice Ng asked Tate upon their first encounter, absent Peter Plan, in the unnamed (and likely unnamable) correctional facility in western Kansas.

Levi Tate gave his birthdate as March 26, 1958. This was the same date that the Explorer 3 satellite was launched from Cape Canaveral Air Force Station, Florida. It was at 17:31 UTC.

When Agent Ng informed Levi of the coincidence, he was unmoved.

“Explorer 3,” he said, and coughed. Dry air in the prison supposedly was gumming up his sinuses.

He claimed to have never heard of that satellite or its possible significance.

Explorer 3 was the last of a series of satellites that the Air Force launched to counter the Soviet sputnik program. Most of the satellites had no purpose except to demonstrate to the world America’s aerospace competencies. The purpose of Explorer 3, by contrast, was to prove the existence of so-called Van Allen Radiation. This was a belt of

charged particles, only some of which originated from the sun, trapped by the earth's magnetic field.

"Almost everything beyond the thermosphere was unknown at the time," Beatrice told him. "Explorer 3 was designed to fly through the Van Allen Belt and record what it found there. There were several Geiger counters on board the craft," she said.

"American scientists wanted to confirm the theory of Van Allen Radiation. The American government wanted to know exactly what they were dealing with before venturing into space."

This was all common knowledge, Beatrice told Tate. What was not common knowledge was that, secretly, in addition to the Geiger counters, there was an antenna/ recorder/transmitter on board Explorer 3, too.

"A portion of Van Allen Radiation came from inter-stellar sources," Bea Ng told him. "The American scientists had a theory that some of it had been alien transmissions that had been caught up in the earth's magnetic field," she said. "James Van Allen himself had a notion that advanced or super-advanced races had placed the messages there thousands of years ago waiting for humans to discover them. He had a theory that the message or messages, once decoded, would alter human history forever. There would perhaps be some great technology revealed to the United States alone. And, so, in a single moment they would win the Cold War. Van Allen had a further idea that everything was predetermined. The satellite's launch had been God's work just as the men who created it. All human history was converging to a single moment of discovery," she said. "Just like the Second Coming. There was no difference between religious and scientific revelation in many of the scientists' minds. The researchers on that project were mostly

deeply religious. They saw the contradictions inherent in the Christian scientist but ignored it as best they could."

Not so much bored as bemused, Levi Tate leaned forward in the bolted-down chair.

"The price of tea in China has a set value," he told her calmly. "Best that that you can state presently what that value has to do with your story."

Once in the Van Allen Belt, she told him, Explorer 3 began to transmit data.

"It lasted forty minutes," she said. "Then," she said, "both signal and satellite disappeared."

But enough information was gathered to decode the meaning of what was relayed back.

"I'm all ears," Levi said to her repeating one of his favorite phrases. It's what his whore mother said to him, he recalled, just before he slit her throat with a broken Coke bottle. Seconds before he told her there was something he wanted to say to her. He told her he needed her full attention to get his point across.

From out of her suit pocket, Agent Ng removed a folded-up card.

THEY LOVED US ONCE, BUT NOT ANYMORE

Tate stared through the bars as if he was having trouble reading. Then he asked the screw at the room's back for a cup of water.

II.

If Beatrice was asking him what this was supposed to mean, Tate said, she was pumping a dried well.

"It's self-evident anyway, isn't it?" he told her making sure his sips from the Dixie cup the water

was poured into were loud enough to register. "Self-evident but mystifying. Just like the universe that surrounds it," he told her. He crushed the emptied cup and threw it at Bea's feet.

It was a long shot after all, trying to associate the date of his birth with this apparently auspicious occasion in human history. Because, he said, how many other now sixty-year-old men and women had been born on that day? At least several hundred thousand. Did Agent Ng and her ilk intend interviewing them individually to ascertain if they were connected to some quasi-scientific occurrence in the 1950s? If so, how did she reckon the causality? Levi and all those other teeming masses were no more than celebrated larvae, thick with afterbirth after forcible removal from their mothers' cunts. Couldn't be, really, that they (or perhaps mum and dad?) had an in with the dour aliens that had sent the interstellar communique. There is such a thing as coincidence, after all. If only because there's too much information to organize. Events overlap, occasionally in an interesting way. These interesting coincidences are the mother's milk of conspiracy. Even in such an informal interview as this, Bea would need to theorize a link between these events before Tate felt it was dignified to even respond. The conspiracy theory was the folklore of a barbaric age. He assumed sophisticated people would avoid endorsing them if only while in public.

But if Tate wanted a theory of connection Agent Beatrice Ng was extremely happy to offer one.

"My theory," she told him, "Is you're some sort of alien confederate planted on earth as collective punishment for humanity."

Calmly Levi asked if her bosses up the FBI chain of command concurred with this assessment.

"Their frame of reference," she said, "does not always jibe with objective reality."

"In other words, they're too dumb to know the truth."

"Just because people don't believe in ghosts doesn't mean they're not real. Sometimes it's best to believe the evidence of your eyes. Sometimes it's wrong to defer to conventional wisdom. And with you, I think, conventional wisdom shrivels up and dies at first contact. It's like putting salt on a clinging leech."

If Levi was a super-powerful alien, what was he doing on Death Row?

"Afterall," he told her, "Dominion is dominion. I should be able to bust my way out of here at any time. Maybe simply just disappear. You and yours would have no chance of keeping me in here. But here I am. In chains like a damsel in a folk song. Helpless and compliant to your wishes. If only to remain alive a little while longer."

So, it was this first unofficial interview with America's Foremost Serial Killer was concluded.

Bea Ng had taken no notes as she assumed they would be subject to perusal by her superiors. The raising of alien conspiracies was a no-go zone as far as any of them was concerned. At best it would lead to misunderstanding. At worst it would lead from her removal from the case. Her sponsor in the Bureau had disowned her in advance. But she suspected as the case dragged on ordinary criminology would fail. Demonology hadn't been used in law enforcement for over three hundred years. Nobody would know where to start, Bea included. There would be no method whatsoever.

She thought perhaps to seek the guidance of a Higher Power. But seeing as Levi Tate was the only higher power in the vicinity, this was a losing strategy. He perhaps would grow tired of her games

and leave. She didn't know what it would look like when it happened. She assumed prevailing authority would have no say when this might be. She assumed all of humanity was like some enormous colony of ants that Tate could have his way with, perhaps at some physical cost, whenever he wanted.

Apart from that first message from Explorer 3 that had made its way up the chain of command, there was a second, less well-known message that had been broadcast in the satellite's last minute of life:

SALVATION AWAITS OFF A CLIFF

As the writhing, still alive figure was retrieved from the silo via a winch and pulley setup, Agent Ng recalled this message.

"Can we get a gender identified?" the local police chief asked Bea once they had made it to the local hospital.

Female, at first inspection, Bea told him. But this didn't account for the possibility of castration. The FBI would need to run a DNA analysis on hair and skin samples to give the Chief a definitive answer. More important to Bea was the victim's identity, both past and present. Within Levi Tate's malign presence all humans were transformed. The victim might have started out as one person but morphed into another. That is, a fully formed second identity. She had known of the possibilities found in the literature. She herself was an entirely magical creation. She alone realized what sort of force they were dealing with. She knew magic was real. If it hadn't been real, she would have known nothing at all.

Beyond a simple identification, further problems arose in ascertaining the true amount of damage rendered on the victim.

"Well, this is all above my pay grade," said the country doc at the rural hospital's ICU that the victim had been transported to within minutes of his/her retrieval. This operation had claimed the better part of a day as the porous lids on the missile silos were rusted shut. In the process several of the welders had gotten sick to their stomachs due to the squirming sight below. There were other bodies to be reclaimed in other silos, but this was the only one Tate left alive. Again, Beatrice was convinced that this was preordained. He was creating a breadcrumb trail for the FBI. He was directing them into some rash action. He wanted somebody left alive to tell the tale.

The country doc was having a tough time keeping his glasses from sliding down his nose.

"Worst we see out here is a burn victim or two," he told Bea after sliding his spectacles back up. "Which is bad enough. This, I wouldn't know where to start," he said. "Apart from the missing limbs, understand, which is obvious. I mean, there are some anatomical things, let's put it like that, that are amiss. I mean there is this thick cartilage from C1 to C4, for example that you usually don't see in humans." He gave her a copy of the CAT scan in case she thought he was bullshitting.

Bea Ng held the film up to the lights. "Not in humans," she said. "Then where do you see it?"

"Marlin Perkins, I ain't," said the country doc. "But if I remember a comparative anatomy class that I took in med school this is a cervical spine more in keeping with a male gorilla than a female human. These silverbacks need this great power through their neck and shoulders in territorial battles. Then again, it all could be the result of an injury. She might have gotten in a car crash while very young. And there's this structural

overcompensation that has been known to occur with somebody that young.”

The doc didn’t sound so confident when he said it. Then again, he was an old-fashioned country doc. More used to burn victims from a grain silo explosion than this. Not that anybody save a demonologist would be used to this. Tate had done things to this human beyond the amputations of all four limbs and the excision of both eyes and the outer structure of both ears. He was apparently going for an effect that had nothing to do with the psychopathology of murder. He didn’t murder her as he didn’t want to. Any more than a great sculptor would want to smash one of his masterpieces to bits. He was making a statement beyond his own capacity for violence. He wanted to transform even as he mutilated. He wanted to express his dominion over life and point out to any observer who viewed the remains that he was a kind of God.

Bea Ng had no idea how the victim had managed to remain alive. Tate had been in custody four years so any chance the victim had at survival relied on someone else keeping her alive through the cold midwestern nights and occasionally stifling days. She would need to be fed, given water, cleaned, and exercised enough to forestall the onset of physical degeneration that would cause her to stroke out within the space of several months. Her right-side up position was problematic for survival as well as it might have induced asphyxiation or brain damaged when held in so prolonged a manner. One of the other cops mentioned that the ropes that held the small platform on which she was dangled had enough give in them to be able to rotate the platform ninety degrees. There needed to be some human handler on call every day to make sure that she did not die.

All this in the service elicited a shock from police when they found the body alive. Peter Plan immediately rejected the notion, despite all his foreknowledge that Tate was the perpetrator in this case. He understood that events that seemed unlikely usually never occurred. The smart move was always to play the percentages. He thought Tate had merely gotten lucky in leading inspectors here. He must have overheard some other prisoner talking about it and the storehouse of bodies that were housed here. He wasn't prepared to believe that one man (or whatever he was) could orchestrate such a complex crime while sitting in a supermax. He thought even evil wizards had limitations. If Tate had confederates on the outside, he likely didn't make them complicit in his crimes. He assumed Tate operated in a completely secret way. It was just easier for him safer for him if information was hoarded. He didn't need other people to kill for him. It went against his M.O. His M.O. was to get in and out quickly, with the body being disposed of immediately after to keep from getting caught.

Look, there was a reasonable explanation for every heinous act that had ever occurred. If only the explanation being that the perpetrator was nuts and his actions were irrational. Agent Plan was eager to admit insanity as the cause of murder but never evil. The problem with evil for a scientist of crime was that it admitted no other cause but itself. This was because it was absent of a first cause. And so, when considering it, an investigator became more of a priest than a cop. But in this case the facts pointed only to an evil perp. Agent Plan, therefore, was in a state of constant denial. And constant denial was the worst state a for a detective to adopt. A good detective was open to the possibilities that the facts suggested. Police work

ended and religious ritual began when one adopted such a dogmatic worldview.

Peter was unaware of Agent's Ng's secret meetings with the suspect. He assumed she thought about the case in the same way he had.

"The first step," he told her finding a tiny room just off the hospital's ICU, "is to set up a stake out of the silos."

He wanted to see who else was involved but Agent Ng did not think that was a good idea.

"You'll never know who they are that way," she said to him. "You'll make an arrest and demand information, and they'll tell you everything they know," she said. "But likely—I think you can anticipate from the way this case is unfolding—he or she will know nothing. This person is a plant designed to frustrate the investigation. It's likely somebody Tate blackmailed or paid to lie years ago. He'll have a story to tell you that has nothing to do with the facts as you know them. He'll give his story and that's it. He'll likely have never met Tate. He'll likely find his own actions inexplicable. Or he'll likely deny he was the person that you wanted. Just another innocent bystander."

She thought if there was something Tate didn't want the FBI to see, he wouldn't have led it to a given crime scene.

"This is all a show from his perspective," Agent Ng told Peter Plan. "Best to not take the bait," she said. "Best to stick to what is already known. Just collect the bodies and try to attach a name to them. Anything else you're playing his game. It's doubtful he wants these cases solved. I think he wants to simply continue in this way until something meaningful happens."

Agent Ng wanted Agent Plan to ask her about what "something meaningful" might entail in this grizzly context. She had ideas certainly along these

lines. But she wouldn't broach them unless asked. She knew the Bureau couldn't abide supernatural explanations for crimes. At best it was a dodge, at worst it was making a mockery of everything the Bureau stood for. Such malarkey should be raised only when there were no other explanations possible. And then merely as a way of moving the case forward.

She had no idea when Peter would ask. Clearly Agent Plan was not about to abandon current crime solving techniques. For some reason he didn't see Tate as tinged with true evil. Or he saw him as evil but wouldn't admit that he did. He was a company man through and through. He wouldn't abandon protocol when the going got tough. He wouldn't give up on a chase just because there was an insurmountable object between him and his quarry.

Taking into consideration Agent Ng's qualms, Peter gave directions for the local police involved in the stakeout. He wanted them to observe from a distance merely.

"Tate's confederates could just give us information," he said to Bea. "And then after hearing it we can both decide what to do next. I mean, if it's all a red herring that has to be investigated too," he said. "These are people who have committed serious crimes. Regardless of if they're true Tate associates, they need to be arrested and answer for their crimes. Maybe one of them will let something slip. At the very least one of them must have gotten a call from somebody. So, there's a trail. And who knows if Tate is as infallible as you seem to think."

As for the mutilated victim, a system of reliable communication had not yet been set up with her. Her tongue and jaws had been unaffected by her encounter with Levi. But somehow, she couldn't form words.

"Eventually we'll set up something like they have for people who are locked in. A Yes-No system of communication. She can use her tongue to click or wiggle one of her stumps," he said. "Eventually we'll get answers out of her," Plan said. "And if we get a positive ID that could hold up in court, if she's declared mentally fit and IDs him straight off, I'm for putting an end to this stage of the investigation. I mean, we have four additional murders to hang on Tate at this point. We can say: if he wants to help us, he can write the names and locations down. We can investigate postmortem. That is, *his* postmortem. Hang everything on his failure to cooperate, if anybody asks. In this way we can have our cake and eat it too. We'll say we got as much information from him as we could. We'll claim we were trying to do our best for all parties concerned."

This was certainly a change of heart for Peter, and Bea wondered aloud if Warden Stiltz had been placing undue pressure on him to speed the investigation to a conclusion.

"Warden Stiltz isn't in any condition right now to put undue pressure on anybody," Peter told her. "They shipped him to Kansas City, where just he's under twenty-four-hour surveillance. They gave him a coloring book and a box of Kleenex. And they let Mother Nature take care of the rest."

It was bound to happen in Peter Plan's opinion. A man wound that tightly was bound to lose it eventually. Phil Sane had predicted something exactly along these lines, but he hadn't connected the dots for Peter. Stiltz had been one problem but Director Sane was another. Peter assumed everything would be smoothed over with the FBI once visual evidence of the missile silo atrocity had been presented. He assumed even Director Sane wouldn't be insistent on keeping Tate alive to the point of defying the massive public outrage that

would result once the visuals leaked. Once Tate's execution took place, he assumed the heat on him personally would be dialed back greatly. From that point it would be ordinary police work albeit of an especially gruesome flavor of ordinary. Peter had assumed fifteen more cases for which there was prima facie evidence of Tate's involvement. Of course, in the churn of investigation more cases were bound to surface. But their discovery would be seen as commendable by the public. Rather than important details that investigators had ignored when Tate was alive.

Agent Plan would surely win some manner of commendation for his work on this case even as admittedly his decision resulted in any number of murders to remain unsolved. With Tate, determining an exact murder tally was so much bean counting, green eyeshade stuff. Inferences could be drawn, and cases could be declared solved absent a recovered body, but the guesswork would remain. This didn't bother him now as much it would have weeks before. He was somewhat perplexed as to his own change of heart. As he realized it had nothing to do with Tate himself. He assumed, not illogically, that he had seen the worst in the missile silos. He assumed everything from this point forward would have a rote quality to it.

So many dead children had been mutilated before they died. Just as battle-hardened soldiers reached a point where the sight of the dead and dying ceased to register emotionally, so to it was with a detective on this case. Everything else would be variations on a theme from this point forward. Emotionally, the case was almost over for Peter.

Famous last words, of course. Agent Plan didn't tell anybody about this conclusion. He would go about his business serenely as possible. He felt no obligation to share his feelings to Agent Ng let alone

any higher up in the Bureau. On the job he never made bold statements about the future. He felt that part of the detective's necessary mindset was to leave assumptions behind and focus on that which was the case. Moreover, he didn't want another detective trying to read his feelings when he or she was supposed to be investigating. He wanted to be true to the FBI which he looked upon with supreme reverence. He didn't want to taint the investigation in any way.

Whatever came up, he would handle it in the buttoned-down manner that he believed was required by all supervising FBI field agents.

"I don't have an explanation for this, I don't have an origin story that matches your symptoms," Agent Plan said to his thirty-year-old son, John-Harvey.

The reason for this phone call was to discuss the latest outbreak of sores on John-Harvey's arms and neck and his belief that somebody or something was constantly following him just out of sight. Peter was in his hotel room just outside Lincoln, NE. He had his shoes off and was lying on top of bedspread with his hands at his sides. His cell phone was balanced on his chest with the speaker on. Each inhalation and exhalation of breath caused John-Harvey's voice to rise and fall slightly.

John-Harvey was having a tough time breathing of late, as the sores (or whatever they were) had penetrated into his trachea. Every so often he coughed up a little blood. This by itself was not so alarming. The real problem came when he tried to sleep. Then his breathing would grow ever shallower and raise the possibility of asphyxiation. He might nod off for forty minutes at a time before being shocked awake. The blood oozing from his sores stuck to the bed sheet and caused John-Harvey great pain upon rising. Once awake he would

scream and then cough a little blood. Then he would close his eyes and try to sleep a little more.

Far worse than this physical distress was the dread caused by the Watcher. Even now the Watcher was masterfully positioned just out of John-Harvey's range of vision.

"I believe his intentions have changed over time," John-Harvey told his father, who, over the course of so many of these consultations had heard it all before. Always when his son's name flashed on his phone screen, Peter's first question was how he was feeling physically. His second question was where was he. John-Harvey was a nomad, a drifter, so-called. This made him much like his father but for distinct reasons. John-Harvey's last bout of gainful employment, Peter recalled, was ten years ago. He had been a safety inspector at a dynamite factory in New Mexico. Ever since then he had no fixed address. He had a notion of his own mortality, he claimed, that kept him from ever settling down.

The Watcher's intentions had changed over time, according to John-Harvey Plan.

"He used to be more mischievous as if he was pulling a prank," John-Harvey told his dad. "Now, I truly believe he's out to get me," he said. "I think I see a knife in his hands or the glint of one anyway when I turn my head real quick. I think it's more of a question who will get who first," he said. "I always have a knife on my person. At the sound of a creaky floorboard, dad, I turn and throw. I don't give a fuck if there's an innocent person that could be harmed by this," he said to dad. "I turn and throw. More than anything, it's a way of telling my Watcher I'm not going to go down easy. It's a way of telling him I can defend myself."

John-Harvey said eventually he would get his hands on a gun.

"And then the playing field is even. My only fear would be that this would cause the Watcher to get a gun himself. Then he would be forever out of range of me."

John-Harvey thought this was his only real chance. The Watcher was superfast. And he had the apparent ability to walk through walls.

John-Harvey had once taken a Polaroid of the Watcher using a side mirror.

"Something was wrong with his face," he surmised.

He had mailed the photograph to Peter who had suggested it should be turned over to the FBI.

"It was an ordinary face," John-Harvey said, "but it didn't move. Just like a mask. And blurry. Cause even blindsided the camera was barely able to capture him."

John-Harvey told Peter he intended to call him same time next week. And if he didn't that's how Peter would know the Watcher had gotten him. He assumed that the Watcher would show himself to John-Harvey eventually so they could have a proper battle. It would have been illogical after so many years of watching to kill him indiscriminately. Anti-climactic surely. At the very least he would get a good answer from the Watcher. He wanted to know why he had been targeted. He wanted to know why it had been him and not some other.

Hesitantly, Peter Plan asked John-Harvey why he thought it had been him and not some other.

"Every so often," John-Harvey told him, "He'll talk to me and give me certain clues about this."

"Clues, buddy?" Peter Plan said.

"He tells me that from where he's from this is normal," he said. "He tells me to stop being a big baby about it all. He tells me I can only make it worse on myself in the end."

In some variegated form Peter had heard this all before. He had heard it one or two times in person, but mostly he had heard it over the phone. Every so often he would get a call from John-Harvey. Peter would ask him after his health then he would ask him for his location. He desperately needed to know John-Harvey was not in jail. He needed to be assured that his parenting had gone so amiss that his son had become just another perp in the system's guts.

He assumed John-Harvey was mentally ill. But he lacked courage to stage an intervention as he assumed this would be the end of their relationship. John-Harvey would simply disappear somewhere in the country's interior and never be heard from again. They wouldn't even find his corpse. It was impossible to track a person like this who had no fixed address or bank account. Aged through hard living, John-Harvey likely bore no resemblance to the seventeen-year-old Peter remembered. If he ever met him again, he might not recognize him. For this reason, he didn't ever want to meet John-Harvey again. He would stare at his son and see nothing familiar. Time had done Levi Tate's work for him. John-Harvey would be completely transformed by it as if by magic. He might as well have had his name changed for all the similarity he bore to his former self.

Whenever he called, John-Harvey would rant about barely perceived enemies and Peter would volunteer to remit him some money via Western Union. He thought with money in his pocket John-Harvey would be able to get off the road. He understood one of his son's problems was that he never stuck around long enough in one place to put down roots. He thought with a little cash in hand John-Harvey could rent a room. And maybe walk to the local free clinic to get some sleeping pills.

"Just a thousand dollars, say?" he asked John-Harvey without first asking him where to send it. Ultimately, the care of the soul must be left to its owner. If John-Harvey wanted help, he would have to ask for it. He could only do so much for his son some unknowable distance away.

Rather than grudgingly accepting the assistance and revealing the station where it should be remitted, John-Harvey began a coughing jag.

"Oh, Johnny that needs to be taken care of," his father said. "Don't you see? God made you perfect as is," he said. "And when you do things to your body that He doesn't want you to do you suffer for it. You need to see a doctor immediately, I'm thinking. And maybe stop smoking if that's what it is. And maybe some warmer clothes."

After the coughing subsided there was a gathering silence on the other end.

"Son?"

"Dad," John-Harvey said. "Dad, there's something I need to tell you about the Watcher."

"OK."

"Of late dad, just of late--"

"Yes?"

"Well, he's stopped threatening me. Now he's threatening *you*."

"I see."

"Something's changed, I guess," John-Harvey said and took a deep breath in. "Not with me but with you. He says he's gonna find out where you're at. He says he's gonna knock on your door sometime in the middle of the night. Just knock on your door. That's it. Wherever you are. Some weird ritual like that. Maybe he's like a vampire and you have to invite him in before he can haunt. But he comes now and that's all he talks about. Getting you. So, this is why I called. This is why I think you should probably be aware of it."

Peter thanked John-Harvey for his diligence.

"When he finally finds me," he said to his son, "what does he plan to do?"

There was a long pause on the other end of the line.

"He doesn't deal in specifics," John-Harvey said.

"OK," said Peter Plan.

"Not in these matters. He doesn't tell you what he's gonna do next time he finds you," John-Harvey said. "If only to leave you hanging, he doesn't say. He wants you constantly in fear. To marinate in it like a leg of lamb. He doesn't want to tell you what the future holds for you."

Peter told John-Harvey that he wouldn't let anyone in that he didn't know.

"But it's not that simple dad," John-Harvey said. "I mean, the first thing I do when I enter a room is I barricade the door. But I think the Watcher's able to walk through walls. I think it's all a big game to him. He could do anything to you any time he wants. It's like you're a mouse in a maze. I think he can harvest you anytime he wants."

As Peter was saying goodbye, he was filled with a wave of grief and revulsion. He thought *this is all my fault*. Though he had no evidence for how this might be, he still thought he was to blame.

John-Harvey only had two parents after all and at least one of them still cared for him deeply. There had to be some manner of a happy ending for all parties concerned. As all parties concerned were in a certain way innocent. Agent Plan had been conditioned by the culture to believe that this was the case. But, given present circumstances, he didn't see how this could end happily. His son was so far away from him just now. He didn't think there was anything he could do for him. Fate would have to intervene on their behalf. But Peter was adamant that there was no such thing as fate. Dumb luck,

then. But counting on dumb luck was the same thing as counting on the universe's at-root randomness. Which, by definition, could not be counted on. Logic dictated, therefore, that it would end badly for all parties. If it didn't end badly, then Peter would be haunted by the fact that it hadn't. Some mysterious force would have intervened, and it would be owed a great debt by Peter. The best-case scenario, therefore, was that Peter would not be alive enough to witness John-Harvey's tragic end. That was a deeply selfish sentiment, but this was the sentiment that logic demanded. Perhaps Levi Tate would do the honors when Peter had his back turned. If this happened, there would be great irony in a monster's granting of mercy unto his enemy. A more realistic scenario was that Peter would have to do the deed himself via a bullet to the brain. In this act there would be no ironic detachment. On the contrary, it would be his life's culmination.

Peter wasn't depressed just supremely anxious over recent events. He needed an immediate break and probably a crash course of psychotherapy. Of late, he had been experiencing dreams that spilled into waking consciousness. A psychotic break, a mental health professional might term it. With such a consultation, he was left to come up with descriptions on his own. He was "distracted" or "logy" or "exhausted" or "in need of a reset." He felt a medical leave at this stage of the case was out of the question. Director Sane would simply reassign him seconds after the request was made. Peter would rather resign than stay on in a diminished capacity.

Minutes after hanging up, Peter Plan lay motionless on top of the bedspread waiting for exterior circumstances to rouse him from his lethargy.

"I think we need to get to know each other better - in bed," a female voice said from the TV and nothing else approximating human speech for several minutes.

Agent Plan kept flipping through the channels but the sub-verbal communication kept transpiring. Perhaps this TV was stuck to the porn channel. Or perhaps every channel nowadays was porn.

Damn thing wouldn't go off on its own. So, Plan was forced to unplug the set. But as he stared at the black square, he became convinced that it was about to flick on at any minute. So, he walked into the bathroom with blanket and pillow and slept in the tub. Lord knew what he dreamt of on this night. His memory the next morning was blank just like the TV. And God wasn't there to guarantee that anything that passed unobserved was real. He dreamed of everything and nothing at once. And when he awoke, he was dead.

It didn't feel all that different than before.

III.

This was in California, OK?

Just outside Modesto, on the same Stanislaus County East-West Road that Mr. Cy Horvath, schlemiel supreme and soon to be demiurge, traveled prior to his Great Transformation, lived a mild-mannered beekeeper named Sam Haim.

"Skeletal man, inside and out," Mr. Levi Tate told Agents Plan and Ng when asked by one of them (didn't matter which) for a story about Sam. "That is," he told them, "The inside of him was the same as the outside. Sam Haim was utterly devoid of extravagance or illusion. And thus, to an extent, he was fragile as any other conglomeration of meatless bones waiting for a shattering blow."

Tate said he had met Haim on his own travels within Stanislaus County sometime in the 1990s.

"I was there on church business," he told the agents and smiled. "Believe it or not, I was doing the business of the Lord. I wanted to be immortal. Through careful study I had concluded that worshipping God was the only way how. I needed to sit by His Throne to kill Him later. Nothing paradoxical in the belief at all. My heart in those days was a bottomless pit that emitted no signal from the objects that were trapped within it. I could love to love or I could love to kill. It all depended on my mood at the time."

Levi sat up on the chair he was strapped into. Soon he began to tilt it from side to side. The retractable bolts that held the chair fast were mysteriously missing just then. Levi felt liberated by the sense of freedom that the rocking provided. He wanted to see how far he could rock before he tipped over. He wanted to give gravity a run for its money. He didn't give a damn how it appeared to the agents. He had long since written them off as his intellectual equals. He didn't think either of them had any claim on his good behavior. He thought they were fools at best and at worst state-sponsored automatons ready for scrapping.

He steadied himself moments before toppling over backwards then crashed forward.

"Anyway, Sam Haim," Levi Tate said. "He lived alone on sixteen acres. He kept 100 boxes of *Apis mellifera* that he mined for honey and beeswax. Nothing unusual there. When I met him, he was at his wit's end. His bees, you see, had contracted American Foulbrood, an early variant of it. Thirty of his boxes were nearly extinct. He had no farm insurance, no well-to-do relatives that he could lean on once the bank foreclosed. Half-mad with grief and loneliness he was looking for a shoulder to cry

on. He was beyond considering suicide by then and actively planning for it. The only factor that stayed his hand was the fate of his bees. They would surely all die without his intervention. They would starve or die of the AFB, as lonely and unsung as he was."

Levi's attention shifted to the grime-covered windows of the supermax. Just outside an Apoidean shadow moved curiously. It seemed desperate to get inside.

"As a balm I told Haim to give his heart to God," Tate told the agents. "Meaning nothing by it at all. I was a believer in the Abrahamic God and His idiotic son, Jesus Christ. I wanted to get in good with Him, see, and was fearful after His enormous surveillance capabilities. I mean, so it is foretold that if you forsake God, even in a dream, He forsakes you forever. He's the greatest serial killer of them all, the most indefatigable and heartless of our kind. It's a hard burden to bear truly. It's every fucking moment of your life basically spent as His slave, praising Him incessantly even though no praise is warranted. He needed to die, but to kill Him an avenger needed to come as close to Him as possible. That was the angle I was playing in those days. I had no intention of revealing my hand until it was too late for all interested parties."

As was the case with so many desperate men, Levi said, Sam's heart was receptive to the message.

"The Christ we worshipped in this church of mine was the Christ of the Veil, the God whose face was hidden to his worshippers at all times," Levi Tate told the agents.

Fighting against his restraints' tautness, Tate held his hand up in front of his face to demonstrate the point. "He was a man but not a man," he said of Sam Haim. "So, what I told him was what other men told me. You must learn to fear the Veiled Christ

more than love Him. As fear, once a man's will was completely broken, might transform into love. (For example: a violated prison punk will always admit love for his violator if given time to have his ego destroyed and built back up. Love is an act of violence, is it not, agents? It's not a state recommended thus for those who wish to escape the nightmare of being. I myself have never loved a single creature. This includes my mother who I see in dreams occasionally and mock her. She is dead while I am alive. But she somehow persists in the illusion that she is my moral superior. She does not see that the only moral imperative the Veiled Christ demands from His followers is to remain alive. Death is weakness to Him and weakness is sin. The Veiled Christ is compassionless you see. His rule is an iron rule. With a single sin heaven is barred forever.)"

Levi Tate lowered his hand slowly.

"I told Sam to close his eyes each night that he remained alive. I told him to conjure an image of the Veiled Christ. I told him to think about the power that this Christ possessed. The Veiled Christ is He who can destroy the universe in the blink of an eye. Eventually, He will. No agents, it is not the fate of mere mortals to know God. But you can grovel like a worm before Him and beg forgiveness from Him. You did not ask to be born nor asked to die. And really, it's not such a leap from despair to dread as compared with the leap from despair to love. To discover dread, the Veiled Christ's will, simply think about hellfire eternal. That supposedly is all that is required of you. The Veiled Christ realizes you are not His equal. He realizes people are capable of little self-control when it comes to the dignity of the grave."

The Christ of the Veil never truly forgave, Levi Tate told them. Or perhaps He did but the ledger on

which all debts were settled had never been presented to mere mortals, so the point was moot. Salvation was a rather one-sided arrangement. God was a serial killer and all men His victims. Within the hands of a greater power one either submitted or died. Sam Haim's road to salvation lay in the realization that all men were fucked. Levi Tate realized that he was fucked and resolved to do something about it. He wanted to become a serial killer along the lines of God Almighty. He wanted to peer behind the veil of God and twist the knife in. He wasn't conflicted on such matters. He knew what must be done. He of all men was prepared to do it. He was in those days a Veiled Christ in waiting. He was a man possessed of a supreme will. It never occurred to him that he would not succeed in this endeavor.

Tate needed to gather worshipers for his God. This was why he recruited Sam Haim and made him the first of his acolytes.

"I had a vague notion about how the universe worked in those days," he said to the agents and leaned back again in the chair. "I had a thought that to gain dominion on earth a man needed an in with the Lord. So, what I did was use Haim and his bees experimentally. I had him bury a box in which the entire bumblebee colony had died just outside his home. Then he and I set up a tent out back and began to pray non-stop for days. I had a Bible that the underground church I belonged to put out. This Bible was significantly different than the King James version. We opened to the *Book of Lazarus*. Therein we began to read aloud. When we came to the book's end we began to read aloud again from the beginning. Soon it became second nature to us. And the words poured from us spontaneously. We were both, as the primitives say, possessed."

Laz 2:12 And when Lazarus emerged from the split in the earth he was changed as never before. His Sister Mary approached and cried out, "O, Lazarus where have you been? And what hath become of your friend, Andrew?"

Laz 2:13 Lazarus stared past Mary and from his eye there emerged a maggot. "The Lord is with me and I am free," he told her. And he said nothing more for the span of days.

Levi looked at the Agents and wondered if he should continue. Over in the grimy window, the Apoidean shadow had vanished. Suggesting one situation to ordinary people but quite another to him. Like Nagarjuna, Tate realized that nothing was intrinsically real. There were merely shadows without objects to cast them. There was merely an ocean of emptiness lapping at the sand bar of the mind. Everything would be subsumed eventually. Nothing lasted. And without permanence meaning was impossible.

Cy Horvath, who was in an unintentional way Levi's rival, would eventually arrive at the bee ranch and pronounce the ground unholy. And that would be that, universally speaking. At the time when Levi was present on it, however, it seemed an otherwise ordinary beekeeper's ranch.

"According to Our Church's doctrine, you were supposed to read aloud from the Book of Lazarus until your voice gave out," Levi said. "We instead stopped after the intercession of an oily rain," he said. "We saw the oily rain as a sign that our prayers were answered."

Sam and Levi dug up the box and placed it on a picnic table. Tate recalled Sam Haim being beside

himself with excitement. He was sure he could hear something scurrying inside. He was sure finally that his prayers were answered.

Quickly Agent Plan stopped his phone recorder.

"It's a nice ghost story," he said to Tate. "But what does this have to do with the incident at Sabbath Day Lake, Maine in 1967? We were supposed to talk about the first murder that you admitted to. You were ten years old at the time. You were, according to your former testimony, in the grips of some possessing spirit. Or simply out of your mind on LSD."

It was a fair enough question, but Levi declined to answer.

"From this point forward, he said to Peter. "I will talk in a circuitous manner. Knowing that as far as my story is concerned all routes lead to a single destination. I thought I made this clear back then too. A single event can stand in place for many. When nothing is real symbol and metaphor overcome their referents. They overrun them like a flood overruns a levee. I present a knot to you, and you are free to undo it or keep it as you like. The choice comes with the caveat that it's the knot, less the rope itself where the explanation lies. You oversimplify at the cost of your own understanding. But that's up to you really. I will not insist upon now that which I was barely able to comprehend before."

Levi Tate saw a tiny shadow move in a cell's corner. He smiled.

"I was going to talk about the box," he told Agent Plan.

"Yes. The box containing all the dead bees. You're claiming some were revived?"

"Not revived, agent," Levi Tate said. "As revival implies being brought back to its original state. That which happened was something almost antithetical to revival, in fact."

"Specifics, please," said Agent Plan.

"See for yourself," Tate told him and from his pocket produced a piece of semi-raw hamburger mined from the interior of a prison patty last week. It had gone rotten by now and produced a rotten odor. Agents Plan and Ng were too far away to notice the smell, but the wasp immediately picked up on the odor. Tate held up his palm as it hovered and fed.

Eventually he described the inside of the recovered box. There, all the dead bees had been transformed into live wasps. These creatures were meat eaters of a strangely vicious kind. Once released, they set on Tate and Sam Haim mercilessly. Their stings suppurated and induced fever a time later.

That night, Tate slipped into a fevered dream from which, according to him, he never emerged. He didn't so much awake as arise to the surface of a new reality. In this reality he was back in Sam Haim's tiny house. He emerged into the brilliant light of morning. Then he went looking for Haim so that they could read the New Church's alternate verse once more:

Laz 5:1 On the third year of his new life, a Bedouin approached Lazarus with a stricken child. Spaketh the Lord through Lazarus: "I know what is to be done." Lazarus approached the Bedouin easefully with a long knife.

"A mouth formed into a constant scream," Levi told the agents describing the state in which he found the beekeeper, Sam Haim. (Cy Horvath when he arrived would find him in much the same position but devoid of meat.) This was not a prolonged bout

of worshipfulness but Mother Nature taking her revenge. The wasps had entered Sam's mouth and laid eggs. And when they hatched, they began, impudent as cherubim, to gnaw at his cheeks and lips. Despite the agony, it must be imagined that Sam died happy. He was, after all, with the Lord. While alive, God's Face had been revealed to Sam. He was of the Elect, Levi said. After a fashion.

When the hamburger was all consumed, the wasp flew away off into the supermax shadows. Agent Plan flinched as the creature flew by. He thought the creatures dangerous and disgusting. He thought they had no place in the cycle of life and were requiring eradication.

Sad eyed Levi Tate began to make strange but precise hand gestures in front of the agents. Where his cuffs were just then was a mystery. Perhaps he never was required to wear cuffs in this cage. Perhaps there was some change in procedure that the FBI had requested of which presently (and mysteriously) they were both unaware.

Peter Plan's thoughts warred constantly with his feelings. This was the case with him of late. He was distracted with the business of John-Harvey. He didn't think anything was different with his son, but he felt that it might be. He thought he might review his own recordings at some point to check if his theories needed updating. He had his phone on his person constantly, so he didn't think the recordings could have been altered. Eventually he would poll Agent Ng about what she thought. If there was some negligence within his role as chief investigator it needed to be noted. He wasn't infallible. But, struggling to recall the case so far, he didn't see that there was anything different. Tate was secure behind bars. He didn't think there was any other security required.

Warden Stiltz was long gone from the facility. Passing by his office on the way-out, Peter saw a janitor in a jumpsuit mopping up the blood on the floor. It was weeks after Stiltz' "breakdown." Peter was wondering why it had taken the prison this long to clean the place up. Perhaps there was so much hidden stress involved in running a supermax that the details couldn't be sweated. Perhaps they had planned to leave his office unoccupied regardless so they didn't see its maintenance as any sort of high priority.

In the central blood puddle on the concrete floor house flies were trapped like mastodons at LaBrea. The buzzing that the live ones made as they struggled was fascinating enough to Agent Plan that he had to stop and stare.

TERRIBLE THING!


said the bearded young janitor by way of his NYID cards. Then

A MAN CAN ONLY TAKE SO MUCH!

On the back of the last card that had been held up to Peter was an image of the famed serial killer John Wayne Gacy Jr. in clown face. It had barely registered with him who it was before the card was flipped. And once it was turned, he felt it impertinent to inquire after it.

What was stranger still was that the janitor's mop held in young janitor's hand was bone dry and blood free.

"They make you work in the middle of the night? You just get on shift?" he asked the janitor slowly enough to allow for the reading. The janitor stared at Peter's moving lips for a moment before a particular card. This was the



THEY LOVED
YOU ONCE
BUT NOT
ANYMORE!

handed to him suggesting that he keep it in perpetuity:



The card smelt of lemon-lime and had a rough feel to it.

IV.

The Polaroid from John-Harvey arrived a week later. It was forwarded from a hotel in Kearney, Nebraska.

“Take a look at this and tell me what you think,” Peter told FBI forensics specialist Jim Most while inspecting a field outside Modesto, California. Shiny and inconclusive, the Polaroid had ever since it had been viewed been a constant source of fascination for Peter Plan. He didn’t think it purported to establish the existence of a Watcher as was John-Harvey’s contention. On the other hand, there was a definite form captured in the room’s dressing mirror. Was it a shadow cast from a window outside of the frame? Was it a reflection of a face held in closeup from a TV? Peter assumed the image could be digitized and subjected to various AI protocols. These algos were expert in determining an unresolved object in a given image.

Agents trusted the algos certainly more than they trusted their own lying eyes. Jim Most could scan the image on his phone and process it from the

field. He wanted a definitive answer. He didn't want to have to spend half the night holding a store-bought magnifying glass inspecting a distorted face. He knew the algos were the ultimate arbiters of what was real. They would shit out a probability curve and that which lived at the apex of the curve would be that which actually was. Of course, the Polaroid itself was low res and could only yield so much information. But the same was true with ordinary observation. Reality was seldom obvious even when it was inches away. One thing could be many things or nothing. Eventually a detective had to make a stand and declare something to be the case. Society would collapse without the conviction that objects existed apart from observers. In that scenario science degenerated to folkways and magical practice quickly. History ran to mythology in the space of a few months. And, as in the Dark Ages, humanity would enter a prolonged and disturbing dream that it would take millennia for it to awaken from.

The algos, purchased by the FBI from self-promoting geniuses in the Silicon Valley, would be man's salvation, its unblinking eye that guaranteed the world as it was. Agent Plan was convinced that this was so and was convinced that any answer would prove satisfactory to both he and John-Harvey. Perhaps John-Harvey had already made up his mind and had already decided what was so regarding his Watcher. He wouldn't be swayed. But his father would do his best to return him to the saving light of day. After all, did it make sense, even if one admitted the existence of the supernatural, for a Watcher merely to watch? Ghosts haunted men for some reason. But what reason was there for the ghosts to only watch them? The Watcher was communicative. But even his communications were illogical. Why warn a victim in advance that you

were coming for them? Was a vengeful spirit so formal in his manners that it first required an introduction to a man to be able to murder him? Even in stories concerning the inexplicable, an internal consistency was required. Thus arose the need to apply logic to a mentally ill person's tall tale. Peter Plan knew insanity was a communicable disease that could kill as deftly as the 1918 flu. He realized himself capable of doing something about it immediately. He thought it was his responsibility especially owing that the disease's principle carrier was his son, John-Harvey.

He would wait for the verdict of the algorithms concerning that smudgy face and accept the verdict as true.

"How you coming with that other thing?" Peter asked Jim, knowing that his time was valuable and he might not have him in front of him for another few days. The "other thing" was trying to identify, again through AI programs, the method of disfigurement of Carol Ann Rodman, the meat angel of Vincennes, Indiana.

According to Jim Most, the app came back with a negative result. Which was to say, it didn't know what it was looking at. Pouring through its own crime libraries it was without a referent to compare it to. Coulda been something was done surgically but you could say that about most any occurrence you come across. That's not criminology but conclusion-drawing through reductionism. An agent could create a stipulation in advance that says surgical intervention was the only way. So, the algos were bound by logic to reach only one conclusion independent of the facts.

"What can we rule out," Plan asked Jim Most.

"That he's an ordinary butcher-psychopath of the Ed Gein variety," Agent Most said.

"You think he's magic?"

"That's a conclusion that's impossible to reach," he said. "Given the logical constraints under which we all work."

"Maybe something to the side of magic," Peter said. "You're saying perhaps he's a genius of murder. He's in cahoots with the dark forces of the world. Those being the CIA, the KGB, and whatever unnamed international cartel of super science that exists in the twenty-first century."

Jim Most paused as a wasp flew across the room. "If Tate was CIA," he said, "likely, we wouldn't have been able to get our hands on him. He'd have disappeared into the Black Budget. Some prison in Romania that they built in the shadows of 9/11 maybe," Most said. "And if he were KGB," he said, "we'd both know it by now. I mean, their idea of high-tech murder is jabbing dissidents in the ass with Ricin agents. The idea is that they want you to know that they were involved. These murders they would disown even if they were involved. I think the intelligence community overall sees themselves as above the fray. The Company in particular has always outsourced their murders. Outsourced them to the mob and various right-wing death squads. They would never associate with someone as earthy as Leviticus Tate. They're likely as afraid of him as every other man, woman, and child on the face of the earth would be if they knew the extent of his crimes."

After Most departed, Peter wondered if he should find a church in the area, regardless of denomination, and pray. He didn't because it felt like giving up. He thought praying was an action Levi Tate might approve of. He thought it was an admission that the world was in the grips of forces that it did not understand.

Peter assumed he was being tested by Tate. It was always Tate's goal to drive Peter to his knees. It was something that Tate wanted absolutely.

Which didn't mean that it shouldn't be something Peter wanted too. He realized responding negatively consistently to Tate's desires to be a kind of trap. Rather, he should center himself and do what he felt was best both for him and the Bureau. There was nothing wrong with praying as long as it wasn't on company time. He felt this was self-evident. He felt that everyone felt the same as he did.

Peter assumed Agent Ng went to church on occasion. There was absolutely no evidence for why he thought so, but he did.

"When you pray," he asked her while walking into the brick house that Tate had alluded to in his reminiscence, "what do you see? Do you see Him and His Son on their thrones staring down at you? Do you see yourself or the person you're praying for?"

In fact, Beatrice Ng was incapable of prayer. She said as much to Peter Plan.

"How come?" he asked her. "Agent, I don't understand your devotion to emptiness."

When Peter Plan prayed, he saw a vast and lightless room populated of nothing, suggestive of nothing save oblivion. Immediately, the act of prayer became the act of cutting through the darkness to apprehend an object. On the exceedingly rare occasion that he did see something it was horrible. It was serpent-like and writhing. Its appearance suggested an extreme predatory nature (though in truth he had never gotten close enough to find out). This creature surely couldn't have been the object of his veneration. He was in the wrong place despite his earnestness, and he didn't understand why.

Prayer by its nature was essential. It should have been as easy as drawing breath. It should have been impossible to get wrong.

Thinking back to her secret meeting with Levi the other day, Bea Ng was eager to talk up her new theory.

"We have confirmation about Tate's exact date of birth," she said. "Which is March 26, 1958."

In response, Plan mentioned that he had just received confirmation that Tate would be executed next week. "Won't make it to another birthday, thank God," he said. "And if there's justice in the afterlife, he'll truly regret everything he's done. He'll truly see the error of his ways."

Killing him so quickly seemed a monstrous mistake to Bea though she was at pains to explain why.

"Aren't we worried about all these cold cases?" she asked him.

"Of course," he said. "But the political pressure's too great to keep him alive indefinitely. Eventually news of the Nebraska site is going to leak. And then we'll have to stop people from storming the prison to get their hands on him. We'll have to move him around from prison to prison just to keep him safe."

Perhaps it could be arranged that news of Tate's execution could be leaked prematurely. At least it would buy the investigation time.

"In my opinion," Peter said. "I think it's high time Tate met his maker. I'm not being excessively religious here," he told her. "Quite the contrary. I think the punishment phase needs to be carried out rapidly for the good of the victims. That man or whatever it was we saw dangling from the silos. He is owed justice. Agent, I think we have the chance to right a wrong here. The wrong being that Tate was ever born. We need to make it happen. Even if there's collateral damage as a result."

Collateral damage. This was a euphemism meaning that perhaps hundreds of cases would be left unresolved and so many of Tate's confederates would be allowed to skate. She couldn't believe the upper reaches of the FBI would give the green light to the plan. So, likely they had been getting pressure from somewhere above them. But perhaps it was Peter Plan himself who was driving this. He might well be soft peddling the evidence they had found thus far about Tate's past. He might well be claiming that a small backlog of cases existed when in reality the evidence pointed to an entire community of the violated. At some point, Bea would be asked to deny this conclusion. He wanted out of the investigation obviously. But he was too much of an egomaniac to admit weakness in the face of evil (Levi Tate). She thought Peter pathetic. She assumed his plan would go awry. Procedures built on craven emotions always failed. Which didn't mean necessarily that Tate wouldn't die. She wondered if all or any of the evidence she had uncovered would change Peter's mind. She believed it would cause him to fear Levi even more.

Tate had never admitted to her what he was in the interview, but he didn't have to. The evidence that he was an alien presence or some sort of human-alien hybrid was overwhelming.

She wondered what would happen once he was exposed to cyanide gas. She wouldn't be the only person in the observation room unsurprised if he continued to exist in the green cloud that formed upon the cyanide pellet's drop. At some gut level all who encountered Levi Tate believed that he was immortal. They worshipped him even as they denied that they did. He was evil itself. Could evil itself be vanquished? Bloody unlikely. Certainly not as easily as you vanquished a common murderer/rapist or a rat trapped in a basement corner.

Agent Ng knew of Peter's son, John-Harvey, and his troubled existence. She supposed Peter's reticence had something to do with him. She had overheard the conversation with Agent Most. She supposed in some way Levi Tate had heard it as well.

Rather than challenge Peter, Agent Ng dedicated herself to doing her job as efficiently as possible. Certainly, this filthy kitchen was a forensic expert's nirvana. The blood stains hid some strange clear plaque below it. The FBI would need to cut the linoleum tile the plaque was on free from the floor to garner an uncontaminated sample. They would need to freeze the entire substance to separate the materials completely. Decades out here in the Central Valley it was surprising the substance was still intact. The fat and the proteins in it should have been reabsorbed into the nitrogen cycle. At best a little bloody dust should have survived the liquid that was spilled.

Agent Ng's discovered that the bump in the floor in the purplish puddle was in fact a smallish yellowjacket of a strange phylum.

She removed a tweezers from her pocket and held it up for inspection.

"A bee in a beekeeper's facility," Plan said to her while checking the phone. "Agent, I believe you're grasping at straws."

A wasp was to a bee, of course, as a viper was to a garter snake.

"No, don't think so," Agent Ng said, wishing Peter would just walk back to the rental and lie down for a while. She didn't mind when he was of no help to the investigation, but she minded when he became an obstacle to it. He had seen Tate's testimony about the Miracle of the Wasps. She didn't know why at this point he would be so dismissive about the testimony.

Something immediately apparent about this wasp was its atavistic appearance.

"Something from the paleolithic era maybe," Ng mumbled to herself once the sample was in the specimen bag. The wasp had a protruding stinger for instance twice as big as a rose thorn. Bea wasn't an entomologist, so she wasn't confident in her guess. But it looked to her like the creature had evolved to be able to battle megafauna. Something from a bygone and infinitely savage age. The wasp was designed to hurt and possibly kill ten-ton mastodons. It seemed impossible that it was still breeding in the twenty-first century.

Agent Plan, who was the still Agent of Record on this investigation had no interest in the wasp. And so, for this reason it would not be investigated rigorously. Even as, in front of Agent Ng, it fluttered a little and came back to life it wouldn't be investigated.

To Peter Plan this was a standard homicide. In the kitchen drawer he had discovered the Alternative Bible that Levi had alluded to. He assumed Sam Haim's body would be located somewhere on the property. He thought that it might be stuffed with dead wasps but if it was this proved nothing. He had every intention from this point on of ignoring any rabbit hole that he found. He assumed once the cyanide cloud formed his troubles would be behind him. The secrets of the dead after all died with them. He assumed within several weeks he would be back in Washington. He assumed a commendation was coming his way for cracking so many cold cases.

The graffito carved into the table noted that a Mr. Cy Horvath had been here at one point.

I IS SI

“When you finally dig Haim up let me know,” Peter said to a subordinate out the window as he began to flip through the pages of this Bible he found. Various rat traps had been placed in between pages likely to injure unsuspecting fingers. At the beginning of the *Book of Lazarus* he found yet another dead wasp crushed to resemble a wax seal. He assumed it was a coincidence and turned the page. He hadn’t read one word.

Chapter Six: Strange Blood

I.

For years up in Toronto, Allan Nutt, a lost soul, mingled amongst the ex-pat community. He survived on pot sales and the odd B and E. The ill-gotten gain he came up with from these creak-ins he would invariably hock at a pawnshop in Hamilton. He received pennies on the dollar for his effort but that's the price to be paid once having broadcast that your wares were stolen. Nutt was too dumb to know this. He thought he would get a bump from a fellow hustler. For the longest time he thought criminality was a club you bought into and reaped benefits from membership.

Allan Nutt was a middle-class boy with middle class notions concerning the Toronto demimonde. It wasn't until he was so deep in it that the scales fell from his eyes.

No honor amongst thieves, of course. It was a lesson seemingly easily enough learned but Nutt had been ripped off on at least ten separate occasions before he realized that saying's wisdom. A fan of Jean Genet, he had erroneously conceived of the underworld as a counterculture filled with colorful rouges. He thought these rogues were like him who stole and dealt drugs only to survive. He

thought like him they were closeted artists who one day would need to disavow their criminal pasts and reconceptualize them as libertinism in the service of art. He was a dope basically and had soon earned his reputation as a dope within the grimy Toronto community of draft dodgers in early 1970s. Lowlifes were always wanting to run errands for him and kept the money they received for themselves. On such occasions, Nutt always believed initially that there had been a misunderstanding. He didn't see criminality as the first resort of the immoral or the last resort of the truly desperate. Against all evidence he always thought others were exactly like him. He had a college degree and had not been drafted. He had literary ambitions. He thought he was serving an apprenticeship of a sort. He thought Dostoevsky started out this way, but he wasn't sure.

The pot he would smuggle in monthly across the border. He would carry it in a gym bag and pay off a guard on the Canadian side of the Rainbow Bridge. Such tribute cut deeply into his profits, but he was too much the greenhorn to figure a way around it. He thought it was the price of doing business. He thought such a maneuver as hiding the pot in the hidden panel of his car too risky. He was terrified of prison. He thought himself too cultured to be forced to rot in jail. Besides this, he didn't know how to fight. He was a punk's punk once in stir. He might as well walk around naked from the waist down so cons could gain easier access to his rectum.

No honor amongst thieves, after all. And amongst rapists and murderers, less so.

Allan was getting desperate with this life of late. He only had 1500 dollars Canadian in his bank account despite years of hustling. Back in January, President Carter had pardoned the draft dodgers and now Nutt was feeling the pinch. His sales were down twenty percent from last year. And the

goddamn fence in Hamilton wouldn't deal with him fairly.

The best that could be said about Rodrigo Lopez was that he had an in with the Lord began Nutt's novel, working title *Resurrection*. The book stretched four hundred fifty thousand words and was growing daily. *The worst was that he took his patronage for granted*, the book continued. *Spent his days blowing pot and shooting smack. He didn't give a damn about so many things. He was better off forsaken.*

He conceived of the novel as a *bildungsroman* without the *bildung*.

"Kerouac meets Jean Genet meets The Bowery Boys meets Jodorowsky's *The Holy Mountain*," was how he pitched this unpublishable motherfucker to literary agent S.I. "Cy" Horvath in Cy's downtown Toronto office. Though it had not been requested, Allan brought the entirety of the manuscript (so far) with him. He carried it in here in two separate briefcases. He wanted to show Cy how industrious he was as well as how creative. He thought he would be impressed if only because of his stamina. The novel had been nine years in the making predating his move north. He thought at the very least he should be heard out.

The Bowery Boys being one of Cy Horvath's all-time favorites, he was roused from stupor momentarily.

"What's your favorite film of theirs?" he asked Nutt balancing his chin on his fists. Cy was doing his best not to doze off. He was trying to steer the conversation into that which might stimulate him enough to allow him to keep his eyes open.

Spook Busters was a favorite of Al's though he didn't cop to it straight off. He assumed he was being let down gently was the reason why. When his elevator pitch hadn't even reached the lobby.

In *Spook Busters*, Al Nutt recalled, there was a subplot involving a man's brain being transplanted into a gorilla.

"The reason I liked them," Cy Horvath told Al once the title was given, "was the sense of possibility you got. The belief that anything could happen. The Bowery Boys weren't as fast as the Marx Brothers, not so anarchic," Cy said, "But maybe a little weirder. Weirdness being defined as the insight and courage to take the road less traveled," he said. "If that's the case, weirdness is what you need in this life. The weirder the better in my estimation."

Cy Horvath rose and extended his hand.

"Not weird enough?" Al asked Cy. "You haven't even read a chapter."

"Quite the contrary," said Cy and put a hand on one of Nutt's bony shoulders. "This isn't a rejection but a *referral*," he said. "You see, this company of late has dedicated itself entirely to cookbooks. Cookbooks and lore from the Maritimes to satisfy the government's demand for Canadian content. To judge by your pitch, it seems neither category would be right for you."

In fact, on page eight hundred forty-seven of his mammoth manuscript, one kilt-wearing sociopath recited from memory his family's recipe for mince and tatties. It began, "Steal a lamb and keep it in isolation from its kind for a year. Then decapitate and marinate the mince with blood. For eight hours."

Al Nutt wondered aloud why Cy had agreed to meet with him in the first place.

"I admire your gumption," Cy Horvath said. "The fact of the matter is, Allan, the written word is dying a slow and agonizing death. It's not for you, all the scribbling and boozing and complaining. The writer's vile mash! You were cut out for finer things

altogether. I'm sure of it absolutely!" he said. "Ask me how I know, and I'll answer you how do I know the sun's in the sky! It's a matter of either faith or simple observation depending on where you are. With you, it's as simple as the realization that you, Al Nutt, are part of a larger narrative than the sort you can write for yourself. You're part of something and it doesn't matter if you realize you are. You're still part of it. Whereas a novelist, at least the good ones, are part of exactly nothing. They're loners, likely involuntarily, who take up writing only to feel less estranged from their fellow men. Whereas you are crucial to so many things at once that I believe if you left the world, history's machinery would grind to a halt. Believe me, I have this lone gift: to know who can be removed and who must stay. You're one who must remain, Al," Cy said. "People count on you, kid. Some good, most not so. But, regardless, you are who they depend upon to self-actualize. You are their Yahweh, if you will, though I don't have time for the concept as traditionally formulated. For you, withdrawal would be defeat. As for Flaubert, let's say, it was triumph. You're not a people person, I'm not saying that. You're more Like Huntz Hall in *Spook Busters*. A holy fool, alright? Which is not to say (and I did not say it) that you are dumb. Not at all."

As Cy talked, he was guiding Al along outside by the elbow.

"You got big things ahead of you," he said to him once in the lobby. The giant manuscript Cy would eventually ship back to him. He didn't have Al's address, but he would eventually ship it back to him. It was a type of magical correspondence only an adept like Cy could pull off rightly. There were so many hidden connections in the world that few mortals were aware of. Over time, Cy Horvath had stopped considering how he knew such things. He

didn't think he was elect, just a little more attuned than average. He could see things before they happened. These things weren't secrets so much as obvious truths. They were truths so dark ordinary people refused to confront them. But Cy was agnostic while considering all things good and evil. He considered good and evil two branches off the same tree. Couldda been wrong on that one but that's how he thought. It all stemmed from the time as a child when he had been dropped on his head and encountered angelic visions. The angels had promoted him beyond human concern. They had given him a golden apple to eat that made him see life the way it was as opposed to the way others wanted it to be.

In the lobby's center up on a pedestal was a facsimile of the Explorer 3 spacecraft that had as of 1957 infiltrated the Van Allen Radiation Belt and discovered unsettling news of humanity's future.

"Will I hear from you again?" Al wanted to know from Cy and stared at the facsimile. There was this enormous aperture on its side where the instrumentation was housed that doubled as an unblinking eye. He felt that there was a consciousness of some sort inside it. He felt he was being challenged by said consciousness to act in a manner that befitted his station.

Following the rabbinical tradition that he had been trained in as a youth, Cy answered this question with a question. "If it is true that change is omnipresent, can you really ever hear from the same person again?"

Al Nutt was about to answer when Cy's office door slammed shut. With Cy on the other side. So, the hustle was complete. Maybe Al hadn't been hustled but it felt like he had. He had left the literary agent's office with no agreement, no explanation, no manuscript. He had expected at minimum two

out of three of these to be his before departing. But Cy Horvath was a hustler of an exceptional pedigree. He hustled you so profoundly you were barely aware of it. He could steal your wallet openly and you would thank him for alleviating you of your ill-gotten gain. Only Al and Explorer 3 bore witness to what occurred. Both were fated to be silent witnesses. They were both taciturn when it came to acts of self-abasement. Cy was in possession of both of their outputs, and they were at a loss about how to respond. Eventually Al might squirrel up the courage to confront Cy. He felt it would be a losing battle. He felt if he banged on his door and demanded justice something else would be stolen from him merely. He had met his match.

Never prideful about his "street" skills, Nutt began to see his being fleeced in increasingly philosophical terms.

"I gotta get out of this life man, I have had my eyes opened."

He spoke this to Siamese twins, Mike and Tom Paste, who were in the building chasing a book deal of their own. Their book was about coin collecting. They were uninterested in documenting their exotic biology, and the coin collecting pitch was met with a chilly response. This Toronto firm had no notion about the desirability of the American wheat penny. They wanted freaks rather, and plenty of them. They had assumed a book pitch about the twins' conjoined status was forthcoming and patiently waited for the coin collecting pitch to peter out. When instead the Pastes engaged in an extended disquisition about numismatics, a particular editor went batshit crazy. He kicked their asses (ass?) out of the office unceremoniously. Which was no mean feat considering they weighed a collective three hundred twenty pounds and possessed six limbs each of which worked in tandem with the others.

You never thought this about the conjoined (or frankly you probably never gave it much thought at all), but they were the last people on earth you'd want to fuck with. They were freaks of course but, excluding the ones joined at the head, far from helpless. Mike and Tom Paste had their dignity. They demanded an apology from the unnamed agent before they left. Once it was received, they packed up their demo collection and strolled out.

Yes, they strolled out. They had one leg each but they were truly graceful in their movements. Truth be told they considered the un-conjoined the unfortunate freaks of the world. Just imagine having to go it alone for the entirety of your days once the umbilicus had been cut. It must have been like exposing your skin to liquid nitrogen daily. Loneliness was a kind of ambient pain that abated only when in another's presence. Likely no conjoined person knew what it meant to be lonely. There was a word for it but no concept. Born as a pair they would die as a pair. Look, the body was a mere receptacle alien to all higher feeling. Raised in a small town a hundred miles north of Toronto, they never experienced the dread that freakdom entailed. They were gifted, beloved of God and their parents. They were completely offended at the reaction they had received in the publisher's office. Was this what it was like in the wider world? They didn't want to find out. They would prefer to keep their illusions concerning the goodness of humanity intact.

Surmising Al's melancholic outburst, they wondered if perchance if he had received the same treatment they had.

"Sounds like it, I'd say," Al said. "Only with a bit more panache."

"We can read it in your face, bud," one of the twins, didn't matter which, told Nutt. "You looked

like the runt of the litter after mama's tits are all occupied. Nothing for you save to pine away and dream."

Al extended his right hand and shook Mike and Tom's far right hand. Then he extended his left hand and shook Mike and Tom's truncated middle left hand.

"Do you boys like to have fun?" Al Nutt asked them, recalling the lid of Fisherman's Friend in his pocket. At least the day wouldn't be a total waste if a pot sale could be made.

"Boy, howdy!" Mike Paste said and gave a thumbs up sign with his opposing hand. Perhaps this was how it worked, with one brother controlling the opposite side of their shared body. Al didn't ask as he assumed it might be a personal question. Instead, he guided them into the office building's back alley and produced the baggie with the Fisherman's Friend.

The brothers looked down at the baggie stuffed with herb.

"Whaccha got they'ah," Tom said in a type of mid-Atlantic brogue. "Oregano? Plan to do some cooking later, do ya? Maybe a nice spaghetti sauce?"

Mike thought a minute. "What you want us to do with all that," he asked Al. "You could make a hundred liters of sauce with all that you have there," he told him.

Their bus north all the way to Churchill left in two hours so Nutt had time to pitch.

"You take it in your lungs and hold it," he told the twins once relocated to the Greyhound men's room. He had a pre-rolled joint in his jeans pocket that he learned to carry with him for demo purposes only. He generally didn't get high during the day. But for tyros like the Pastes, it was perfect. He

wanted to make a sale. He wanted to reclaim part of the day that Cy Horvath had stolen from him.

He asked the twins if they smoked cigarettes.

"Mike does," Tom said, passing the lighted joint to his brother. Occasionally a person would enter the john then turn around when he saw what was taking place. They needed to be quick in case one of them called the cops. Al assumed Toronto cops had better things to do than bust post-hippie types waiting for the bus. But he felt the need to be quick regardless.

Mike Paste took the joint from his opposing hand and inhaled. "Wha's supposed to happen," he said to Al. "Something spectacular and unconscionable, maybe?"

The Baby Jesus, so Al Nutt recalled, once repelled down a length of spider's filament from the ceiling. This was when Al was high on Fisherman's Friend. And maybe a bit of angel dust that the Friend was laced with as a spur to hallucinate.

"It's supposed to take the edge off," Al said to Mike. "I mean nothing too fancy, it's supposed to calm you down," he said. He had already noted the strange shade of blue Mike's face was turning after the fourth puff. Which was an abnormal reaction in the extreme.

Passing the joint to his brother, Mike took no notice of his condition. "So far so good," he said. "Though truth be told the smoke's a little too harsh for our exotic constitution."

Exotic constitution? This never occurred to Al, even though he was no sort of medical professional. He never considered that there was anything wrong with the Pastes aside from them being stuck together. God would be laying it on thick on he thought to have there be something else strange about them. But as Mike would describe it, they had been born under a bad sign. The Pastes needed

twelve surgeries before mum and dad could even remove them from the hospital after their birth. They had several organs in their chest that there was no name for. Their blood composition was categorized as “strange.” This was all the doctor had said when a sample was run. Strange blood. He had no doubt they wouldn’t make it past their third birthday.

They sure showed the doctor. But regardless at least externally the weed was affecting them in an unusual way. This shouldn’t have been cause for concern to Al. Unless something terrible happened to them in the john while he was with them.

When Tom’s face began to turn that same shade of blue, Al thought that discretion was the better part of valor.

“We OK?” Al Nutt asked them, unconsciously having taken a step towards the door. “You look like maybe the air’s having a tough time penetrating. And maybe there is discomfort?”

Rather than answer him, Mike Paste’s head began to rapidly shimmy on its neck as if gaining separate consciousness from its body and wishing to remove itself from the mass.

“Why wouldn’t we be, hoser?” Tom who seemed the least affected of the two said to Al. “You’re the one who served it to us, ain’t ya? Why wouldn’t be fine with your oregano?”

So it was that the ululations both brothers emitted just before balloon-like their heads detached from their damaged core and floated to the top of the men’s room ceiling were noted by Al for their strange aural patterns. This was a message in code. Taking only twenty seconds, nevertheless, it would never be forgotten by Al Nutt. As far as the code’s meaning, he could only translate tiny bits. One bit was warning him to be more direct in his dealings with Cy Horvath. One bit was a

broadcasting a warning about the extinction of life on earth. It was claiming somehow that Al was the key. Even though presently he was a broke ex-pat. He didn't know how this was possible. He thought perhaps it might have been a case of mistaken identity:

YIYIYIYI-
 UUUUUUUUUUHHHHHHHH-
 YIYIYIYIYIYIYIYIYI (pause) (pause)
 UUUUUUUUUUHHHHHHHH
 UUUUUUUUUUHHHHHHHH
 UUUUUUUUUUHHHHHHHH (pause)
 UUUUUUUUUUHHHHHHHH!

II.

Two weeks after the fateful meeting, Nutt recalled the wet popping noise of one of the Pastes' helium-filled heads upon its unfortunate encountering of the lavatory fan above.

"By then, I wasn't sure I was anywhere in the known universe let alone the terminal shitter," Al told his row mate on a California Greyhound, Huitzilin Johnson, an hour or so after pulling out of Boston. He hadn't been terrified by the occurrence, so much as mystified and misdirected. It seemed that God, if such a concept could be spoken of in 1977 unironically, had spoken to Al. As ever with the Lord, His diction wasn't especially clear. He left a listener with a lot of loose ends to consider. But he had gone insane in the manner of so many of his creations. He provided direction absent of specifics. Perhaps he did not know what he wanted exactly but spoke anyway out of force of habit.

He neglected to ask one of the Pastes if such ululating was common practice amongst those who might well be considered an alien form of life. If Al

had known in advance what was coming, he might not have been so put off by it when it occurred. Regardless, the message they communicated to him was (somehow) clear. It was as if they were talking to him in a commonplace voice. It was as if their ability to ululate was so advanced that they could substitute the noise for speech. The code could be understood instinctively by all peoples of the earth regardless of native tongue. Maybe they sensed that their race was run and needed to communicate with AI in as expeditious a way as possible. They had recruited him not the other way around. It was entirely possible. As with so many others nowadays, he lacked an ordinary understanding of reality. He wasn't willing to discard any possibility simply because of its superficial strangeness. Wouldn't have been open-hearted of him. But regardless of their intentions, AI was sure they were dead.

Grabbing their demo coin collection off a bathroom sink, Nutt had walked briskly out of the terminal. He found himself with no place left to go. When God spoke to you it was often the case that you were bereft of a place to go. All concepts of property let alone propriety vanished at that point. You found yourself a wandering mystic in the manner of St. Jerome. You belonged to no one and nothing. Just as nothing belonged to you.

Just before splitting via his '72 Vega for the States, Al Nutt made sure to abide by the Lord's directive.

"God wanted me to fuck with Cy Horvath so I fucked with him," Al said to Huitzil Johnson pointing to the Explorer 3 facsimile on his lap. The night after his vision, he exercised his B and E skills in the service of the Lord. He smashed the display and put the goddamn thing in a garbage bag. He figured it had to have some great value or else it wouldn't have been housed in so privileged a

location. As it turned out it wasn't so much a facsimile as a miniaturized version of the real McCoy. It had a functioning Geiger counter and transmitter. Its shell was covered with mysterious scratches as if some talon-bearing creature had been trying to crack it open in the manner of a parrot with a walnut. But it seemed to be in working order which was strange as it seemed so old. Likely Cy would miss it, which was all that mattered.

Looking at the Explorer 3 facsimile, Huitzilin thought it resembled a robotic creature from a movie she had just seen.

"*Star Wars*," she told Al. "You seen that yet?"

The last movie Al Nutt had seen was the death-on-the-interstate flick the highway safety patrol showed you in driver's ed. He wasn't a movie maven. He said as much to Huitzilin Johnson who was disappointed. She wanted to have something to talk about with him at least until they reached the Mississippi River.

In *Star Wars* there was a little gravity-defying orb that Luke Skywalker trained with. This was what Explorer 3 reminded her of. And she assumed it possessed the same capabilities.

"What's it do?" she asked him.

Aside from orbit the earth, Al didn't know. He assumed eventually Cy would track him down and let him know. It had to do something, didn't it? Besides measure radiation. Al hadn't bothered to research the object before stealing it. It really didn't matter to him what.

He told her, however, that he had smuggled it across the border in his Vega trunk. Once in Boston, he had sold the Vega and checked in to a welfare hotel to await further instructions from God. He figured at some point God (or one of the Pastes' balloons) would be in further contact with him. He needed to know so many things. He figured

something akin to a burning bush would be shown to him before next steps were taken. It seemed logical that it should be so. He assumed he wouldn't be destined to fail due to lack of information.

If God wanted you to do something, He spoke to you in an unambiguous way. The meaning of the communication was never in doubt. He wasn't a character in a 1930s screwball comedy where misunderstanding led to hilarity. He would tell you what to do and you would have the choice of fulfilling His Will. It was cut and dry, unlike Al's encounter with the Pastes. Therefore, Al believed he would receive further instructions. Presently he was riding across the country to facilitate the talk. From Kerouac, he had divined the road to be a holy place. He thought vagrancy and saintliness were intertwined.

Eventually he believed he would glean the importance of Explorer 3.

"But when it comes," he told Huitzilin, "by that time I could be an old man on my deathbed. I'm determined not to push God for an answer," he told her. "Because I think in a way my ability to stay patient is what I'm being tested on."

So it was, Huitzilin noted, with Luke Skywalker in *Star Wars*.

"Luke kept on pushing, wanting to know why him, why him," Huitzilin told Al, summarizing the Jedi-Knight-to-Be's exploits. "But it was only when he quit pushing that he found out how to use the Force. He let it guide him and it made him whole," she said checking her memory if this was indeed what happened. Well, you don't need a movie to let you figure this out," she said. "It's like me and blackjack."

Al asked what ability was gained by this suppliant hero's opening his mind to the Force.

"The ability to kill a whole bunch of white people," Huitzilin said. "I mean, not with a blinking of the eyes. It was all over quickly for the inhabitants of the Death Star. But, on the other hand," she said.

"Yes?" said Al Nutt.

"They all had it coming to them," she said. "In the end they got what they deserve."

She thought there was a moral truth in this happenstance but Al Nutt, to judge only by what he had just been told, doubted this was true.

"In Hollywood, it's better to be good than evil," he told her. "Obviously. Because good always triumphs. I mean, don't any of these evildoers study the job outcome before applying? Don't they know an ass-whipping is in store for them before they even get to the orientation?"

It was Huitzilin Johnson's opinion that this was the way all people were built, leaning innately to either evil or good. They didn't have a choice.

"If that's the case," Al said, "they're beyond salvation. If they don't have free will, they don't have souls," he said. 'So what difference does it make if they live or die? Might as well kill 'em to hear the pleasing crunching of their bones. Might as well let 'em live as the mess they make after dying isn't worth the cleanup effort."

The game that Huitzilin was bussing to Las Vegas to compete in was called Patolli. Huitzilin was the number one ranked Patolli player in North America. She had an in with the great God Macuilxochitl. Routinely, the God listened to her pleas for swift movement across the gameboard and was rewarded. He let her win if only that her winnings could be sacrificed to him. He made her somebody far more important than her meager circumstances suggested she otherwise should be.

In Patolli, the object was to move your game pieces off the board as quickly as possible. Once this was accomplished, the treasure of your rivals would be inherited.

"It's all random, you do it through dice alone and the invisible hand that puts the numbers in place," Huitzilil told him when asked. "It's not chance, so much as a test for your own favored status," she said. "Nobody gets rich playing the game," she said. "In fact, the opposite is true with American-style rules. You're diminished by it as time goes by. Sometimes, you die right there in your seat before you can tap out."

Indeed, with American-style rules you wagered not physical possessions but parcels of your immortal soul. This was what Macuilxochitl survived on, this was his staple food.

"Over time," she said, "you lose sense of who you are. Playing the game. Over time you stop thinking about the differences of when you are playing or not playing. That's how you know you've lost."

When Macuilxochitl takes the part of your soul that you have wagered, according to Huitzilil, the world blinks out of existence momentarily.

"Nothing too strange," she told him. "Something like eating a whole bunch of indicia on an empty stomach. "You phase in and out of the world momentarily. But eventually, over time, you lose your zest for living. Macuilxochitl holds it for himself. You become his over time. You leave this world and start thinking about the next world over," she said. "It's not so bad really," she said. "You play with the understanding that it's all going to go away eventually," she said. "You don't sweat the little things so much. You don't consider yourself unlucky for all the things that have happened to you."

The good part of the bargain, the part that all Patolli players struggled towards, was the granting of immortality.

"You're swept from the table in a tornado of fire," Huitzilin told Al Nutt. "Then you are put down, transformed. At the same time and place."

Responding to the prompt, Al Nutt asked when and where.

"Santa Monica Boulevard, West Hollywood, August 1974," she told him. "You come back as a skinny boy hustler, she said. "Regardless of your gender you're a skinny boy hustler now. And for the rest of eternity."

Square that he was, Nutt considered this an unpleasant fate. Thus, he would not be participating in any Patolli tourney.

"I've already got my dance card completely punched," he said to Huitzilin. "That is, in terms of serving God."

He recited his recent travails to her and the notion firm as he might be that God was both real and needy.

"He wants something of me, obviously," he told her. "But it's hard to say exactly what."

Maybe Al should go view *Star Wars* to get inspiration. Maybe the film was created for him alone. He would look at the flick and meet instant recognition as to its meaning. It would all be about him even though the filmmakers wouldn't have known it. That was how magic functioned. Invisible strings were pulled and the universe responded seemingly on its own.

If this was the case maybe Al would not have to stick around to see all those innocent people die.

Once in St. Louis they parted ways. Huitzilin had a great aunt in the area that she wanted to visit before carrying on. For himself, Al was finding bus travel constricting. He thought it was slightly

undignified given his newly exalted status of prophet-in-waiting. He didn't believe himself really in any hurry to anywhere. He saw himself as wide open to possibility. He assumed that God spoke just as clearly in Kansas as in California.

He started to hitch hike just as he had gotten outside the St. Louis city limits. In the meantime, he had traded in his suitcase for a backpack. The Explorer 3 facsimile poked out of its top just like C3PO out of Luke Skywalker's attack ship when journeying to blow up the Death Star.

It hadn't been a conscious choice, that is, a homage to everybody's suddenly favorite movie. All those people who would question him about it between here and Barstow wouldn't believe him when he said he had never seen the flick.

Look here, he was chosen by God. He wasn't doing schtick. He wasn't some fanboy who couldn't remove another man's creative output from his imagination to create his own. Somewhere in Colorado he became hot to simply chuck the facsimile into the nearest ditch before recalling that his bearing it across the country was preordained. He didn't get it, they hadn't translated it for him, he couldn't see what so great about this fucking film that the entire culture seemed to be orienting around it. It bothered Al that so many folks were so unprepossessing regarding their cultural objects of veneration. He wondered how many people, all those kind souls who had let him ride, had actually seen *Star Wars*. It couldn't have been every one of them, could it? Nothing, not even Johnny Carson, was so ubiquitous and beloved. Even Jesus Christ when he descended again to save the world would likely have His detractors. Al Nutt thought this was a hard fact. He thought everybody talking the movie up was so much pretense. He thought the goddamn

movie was overrated long before he had viewed a single frame.

In fact, it wasn't until December of that year that he had finally become motivated enough to judge for himself.

"How much," he asked the ticket seller at Grauman's Chinese Theater, 6925 Hollywood Boulevard. It was two in the afternoon but somehow the Boulevard was nearly abandoned, as if a civil emergency had been declared and people were sheltering in place. Vagrants on the pavement were using walk of fame stars—Dorothy Lamour, Robert Young—as pillows for their heads. Every so often a piece of garbage would blow into the scene tumbleweed-like to reinforce the sense of desolation. Up and down the sidewalk a drug-addicted Little Tramp was shivering as he shuffled. He stared into each passing car as if his salvation dwelt inside. It was nearly Christmas, wasn't it? Why so glum, Hollywood, so *farklemt*? Wasn't this the center of human consciousness, circa 1977? Wasn't this the town all people strove to live in regardless of nationality or political orientation?

A buck fifty for regular admission. In Al Nutt's mind, the film was over-priced. He asked the ticket taker if there was a veteran's discount.

"Veterans?" said the ticket taker. "You mean because you take care of animals?"

Yet another disappointment waited inside the theater.

"I was going to bring my instamatic with me," Al said after taking off his backpack to get more change for his soda and popcorn. "But there's nothing to see here," he said. "The carpet looks like it hasn't been cleaned in twenty years. And it looks like you've sold off all the ornamentation in the lobby to make next month's rent."

In fact, the theater was slated to close earlier that year but was saved by the *Star Wars* phenomenon.

"They doll it up come Oscar time," the kid behind the counter told Al after handing the popcorn over. With the large Coke it cost two dollars. For what it cost to see a movie nowadays, Al thought, you could get high ten times over. You could fill up your gas tank and likely go somewhere more interesting than the place any movie took you. Al Nutt thought the whole film industry was a rip off. Which was likely why he hadn't even heard of *Star Wars* until the Aztec girl started telling him about it. Well, here was another of life's disappointments soon to be encountered. And he had just paid three fifty for the experience.

The counter kid looked at the object in Al's backpack sitting there on the theater's threadbare red carpet.

"It's a *Marksman-H Combat Remote*," he said pointing at the Explorer 3 facsimile. "We have one on order for the lobby."

Al Nutt was about to correct the kid before thinking *why bother?*

"How long do you intend to play this flick?" he asked the kid. "It gets a bit shopworn after a while, don't it?"

According to the kid, people came to see *Star Wars* dozens of times. To them, it was more like a religious experience than a pastime. It took them somewhere else other than where they are. It lifted them up and gave their shabby lives dignity. Weirdly.

If Al had brought around his Marksman-H on Saturday night, according to the kid, he would have gotten in for fifty cents.

"People dress up," he said up the midnight show, "and transform. They're one person before

they wear the costume and a second when they have it on. It's like magic, in a way. At least it's the only magic they'll ever see in their lives."

The only real magic anybody ever saw, Al thought, grabbing his backpack as he held the Coke and popcorn in the other, is the magic where life turned to death in an eye blink. He thought it ridiculous that anybody could have such an obsessive relationship with a Hollywood creation that he or she could become transformed within its penumbra. Even hardcore religious instruction didn't have that effect on Al Nutt. He believed in God only because God spoke to him once. But he believed in death with every atom of his motherfucking being. He had seen it close-up in his workday perambulations. He thought death had the final word over everything. He thought finally even God must die.

Perhaps God had something to do with the *Star Wars* phenomenon and had created it as an antidote to Death worship.

"You worship the movie and it makes you believe you are saved," Nutt said to himself once situated in the theater. Apart from him there were only two other people there with him, one an obvious afternoon drunk who was sleeping it off where he couldn't be seen. The other was a crewcut sporting young man in the front row. He sat with his forearms on each armrest as if the theater was a spaceship about to blast off into orbit and he was bracing for liftoff.

Perhaps at some point if Al continued to abide in LA, he would visit the midnight showing the concessioner spoke of. He wanted to see the magic up-close for himself. He wanted to test its fundamental reality. He wanted to make sure that its visions were on a par with his visions and neither

one of them were to be excluded merely because a bit of falsity could be detected in its presentation.

He might bring a gun to the showing if only to blow participants' minds. He would tell them: *you have a sword made of tin foil and I have a gun made of steel*. He would ask them which of these was more valid. Perhaps his gun would melt right in front of them, and he would have his answer. But he felt the question was worth asking. He assumed many of these folks had given up on the Old Reality having found it so unpalatable.

Before the movie started, there were a series of trailers for films that Al in his newly riled state assumed as Hollywood self-parody.

A trailer for a disaster film involving killer wasps called *The Swarm* came on. This set his eyes rolling for two minutes. A trailer about a girl who shoots lightning out of her eyes called *Jennifer* came on and caused him momentarily to rethink his presence in the theater. Was this the best Hollywood could come up with? If so, what were the prospects of *Star Wars* being any good? Movies were depressing to go to nowadays. Therefore, by and large, Al Nutt stayed away.

He assumed one goddamned flick was the same as the next. Unlike dying, there was no magic to them. Nothing changed once the film was over.

The film's famous diagonal prologue rolled, and the triangular spaceship emerged from overhead. By this point the boy with the crewcut had seemingly by magic maneuvered into the row next to Al's. Just as before he was sitting in the same hypervigilant way. It was Nutt's contention that he had met him sometime before.

The boy was gnawing on a single strand of Red Vine and trying to act as oblivious as possible regarding Al's presence.

"I see you are a secret fan," the young man said finally just having entered the scene into the trash compactor. The runoff from the Red Vine was on the boy's chin but he didn't seem to mind. He wasn't the sort to put on airs for a stranger.

He was alluding to the Explorer 3 facsimile still prominent at the top of Al's backpack. In fact, Al said, there was his first time seeing the movie.

As the afternoon drunk had lately slipped beneath the rim of the seats, they felt free to converse openly independent of the action on screen. Frankly, Al had been underwhelmed by the picture thus far. He had seen this all before he felt in some version or the other.

Once the trash compactor's progress had been halted, the young man invited Al outside for a smoke.

"Bring your shit with you," he said to him. "There's nothing to see here that you haven't seen already."

Walking outside, the harshness of the light immediately struck Al Nutt.

"You just get into town?" the young man asked him, pointing to the backpack.

Al Nutt shook his head. "I like carrying it around with me," he said. "Besides, I've been appointed by God."

"Appointed to do what?" the young man asked him.

"I assumed at some point I'd have been told," he said. "As of now, there's nothing," he said. "So what I do is I get up each day and wait for a sign from Him. I assume at some point something will be said. Or else it's all delusion and I have nothing to worry about. One way or the other I have it covered. If I'm vigilant I don't have to worry about anything."

Perhaps this very conversation was the sign he had been waiting for. The holy clockwork of the universe would be revealed to Al shortly.

"What is the lesson to be learned from that flick?" Al asked the young man, who gave his name as Shane Fulcrum. "I mean," he said, "I dig the fantasy. But why do people come back to it so often? I don't see the reason for the affection that's held out for it. Not even close. I don't come close to revering it like so many other people."

Just past his twentieth birthday, nevertheless, Shane was fulsome with circumspection.

"They like an obviously moral universe," he told Al, looking through the haze of his cigarette. "They don't like mixed messages and this movie doesn't give them any," he said. "They like elements of good and evil completely separated from each other, so you'll be able to tell which is which at all times. I mean, that's the whole fucking point of corporate art. Corporations tell stories to help proles identify who is good in it and who is evil. That's the great shakeout. The movie ends and all the characters have been assigned either a black hat or a white hat. They want that in real life. They all do. Even if it means having to abide with evil incarnate. They look at themselves and believe themselves good. They never understand the paradox that a truly evil person believes uncritically that he is serving the cause of a greater good. Darth Vader was nobody's villain in his own reckoning. He had an empire to run and rebels to overcome. He should be looked upon as somebody who provided peace and security to his people. Build a statue in his honor. Name a fucking junior high after him."

Shane Fulcrum said that the wanting of that which was fundamentally unreal doomed us all.

"People generally have their heads crammed up their rectums," he said to Al. "And it's up to the rest of us to remove it for them."

One way to do this, he believed, was to shock them out of their complacency through repeated and escalating acts of violence.

"You just don't let up on them, just don't give them a fucking break," Shane Fulcrum said to Al Nutt. "They want this fairytale for themselves, you give 'em a nightmare," he said. "You become evil incarnate for them to weigh their sense of goodness against it. Make 'em see that they were better off not believing in goodness. The good comes with the bad after all. Take their sense of normalcy away from them. Eventually they'll think warm thoughts about Darth Vader. I think it's a sound program of rehabilitation, killing without mercy," he said. "I think it's something the world needs more of actually," he said. "You go out and take the battle to them," he said. "Start with these dorks who worship *Star Wars* so much," he said. "I mean, they're the first line of defense for this kind of nonsense," he said. "I mean, you can do it any way you want to finally, just as long as you hurt them first," he said. "You have to make your impression felt on all those who come after them. You need to leave evidence of your cruelty behind so that they'll get a sense that good and evil aren't all that they're cracked up to be."

Apparently, having thought all this out to such a degree that he could go on like this for hours, Shane Fulcrum had arrived at a series of unshakeable conclusions. He seemed a philosopher of violence, a person who had made a detailed study of it from a distance and was prepared to share his results with the world.

"I've smoked two people so far," he told Al, anticipating that the question was coming. "Though,

to the best of my knowledge, neither of them were *Star Wars* fans.”

Rather, according to Shane, these were crimes of opportunities, one man and one woman in various states of disrepair who likely would not be missed. Shane took ‘em off the streets and did as he wanted with them. He got ‘em loaded and did them in with an old-fashioned manual punch press that he found lying around out back of his rooming house. Once upon a time, Shane explained, LA was a city in which things were made. This punch press was an artifact of those days. He thought he was engaging in a type of ironic homage when employing it for nefarious ends. He thought he was serving the Dark God that ruled this universe well through such creative repurposing.

The punch press used a ten-pound steel spike that when activated by a spring mechanism could pierce a quarter-inch thick copper plate.

“When I found these folks years back, I took ‘em off the street. They were high on something, drunk on something, I’m not going to say what,” he said. “They claimed to have been brought here by a vortex of fire from somewhere else,” Shane said. “They claimed to have been playing some sort of game when the Aztec God whom they served grew tired of them.”

Al Nutt wondered if this was a sign or one more bit of Hollywood weirdness. He wondered if Shane Fulcrum and Huitzilin Johnson were as connected to each other as the Paste brothers were.

This all happened within the space of two months. Since then, Shane had lost the taste for killing.

“It’s hypocritical of me, I realize, but that’s that,” Shane said. He said it wasn’t killing that had caused such consternation in him, it was getting caught. He said he needed to develop a full-proof manner of

murder. This endeavor had driven him towards a guru. He needed the services of someone who didn't require a press punch to kill. He needed to know the ins and outs of the art before he took it up in earnest.

The person he was looking towards now to help him in this endeavor lived in a warehouse off a San Pedro dock. His name was Lyle Tabor, and he knew things. He was young enough but somehow deeply practiced in the ways of the Dark Side. He was deeply aware of esoterica related to spell-casting and had a supremely agile mind. He could name you twenty different ways to dispose of a corpse, for example. He could chant curses in seven languages and brew poisons distilled from pieces of his own skin. He claimed moreover a full-proof method for death and dismemberment. He claimed there was a detailed procedure that any human being could follow. He was certain they would not be caught.

One step, likely the most important step, that Lyle Tabor demanded be followed was to swear complete obedience to him for all time.

"He claims magical abilities granted to him by mysterious forces," Shane said nonchalantly. "And he is not bashful about demonstrating these to you. For example," he said, "he told me that you would be here in this movie theater. He described you perfectly down to the backpack you're carrying around with you. He described the mini satellite you would have, too."

There was an LED diode on the facsimile that as soon as Lyle Tabor's name was mentioned began to blink violently. Al Nutt was still not completely aware of the light's source. He thought maybe the flashlight that he had packed back in Toronto was malfunctioning.

To Al Nutt this suggested that Shane was either lying about Lyle Tabor or he was being surveilled.

"I'm not interested in any of this dark wizard shit," Al said watching the smoke curl around Shane's face. "Besides, if he wanted to talk to me, why didn't he come himself?"

Shane Fulcrum exhaled a ring of smoke before replying.

"Who says he wants to talk to you?" he said. "He sent me to talk to you. Which maybe means that he doesn't want to talk to you."

Al looked confused since the first time since that time in the Greyhound men's room. "Do you want to talk to me?" Al said.

Shane Fulcrum shook his head. "I don't want to talk to you, man. I do what I'm told only. So, let's go."

Shane snapped his fingers. Suddenly they were someplace else. Transported by magic. The alley around them had disappeared. Presently they were in an enormous room that had the feel to Al of an underground bunker. The walls stretched into the shadows appearing as a room without limit. He could see shafts of light pouring down from concrete silos above. And from somewhere a pervasive noise like a chimpanzee's squealing was sounding.

In his backpack suddenly, the satellite facsimile was making strange noises too as if hearing the call and responding to it.

"Three guesses where you are," Shane said to him and began in his own way to shiver. Soon he was born aloft just like the heads of the unfortunate Paste brothers. Unlike those, there was no barrier to hold them down. The silos opened-up to some lighted area that Al assumed in turned opened to infinity.

He had a story to tell about Lyle Tabor on the way up. It involved the notion of Higher Powers existing all around them. Higher Powers, call them what you will: pagan gods, or angels, super-evolved

extra-terrestrials, or the God of Abraham, Jehovah, and His illegitimate spawn Jesus of Nazareth. Perhaps they were all the same. Or more accurately incarnations of the same supernatural force: *Iratu*, the spirit of creation, irrefutable justification, whose universe spanning consciousness perceived all and reshaped all whimsically—but for such a force there was no external justification possible. A dreamer after all did not justify himself to the dreamed. One is creator and one is created. Thus, as ever. In the presence of real power, a man may only despair. There was no explanation possible and therefore no comfort. In its presence a man longed for the traditional view of death which was oblivion. Only there may you be free of his gaze. Until He decided to reincarnate you on a whim. At which point the cycle started over. And you were empty of hope forever.

When Shane ascended to the midst of one silo, Al detected various people in the room's shadows milling about.

"Is Lyle here now?" Al asked Shane Fulcrum. He rather doubted it as such a presence, to judge only by reputation, would not remain unannounced.

Shane Fulcrum didn't answer him. Merely he began the process of cocoon weaving. Filaments emerged from his open mouth and wrapped themselves about the rebar protruding from the silo's top. These were tied off at the cylinder's bottom forming a series of interlacing X's inside.

Something was intended to go there, to be placed there perhaps for longtime storage.

"Are you coming up?" Shane asked Al in a barely perceptible burr. His mouth had been corrupted with these filaments so profoundly that the tongue barely reached his mouth's roof. Al Nutt didn't know what to say so he didn't answer. He supposed he would answer with an action of some sort

eventually. He would either rise or try to flee. And there would be Shane's answer. It had nothing to do with Al in a way. It was strange that he was even being asked about it.

Loosened from reality, free from reason, Al Nutt felt he had finally arrived. But this was not God's heavenly palace he was amid. It was a dark, earthly place built for a dark purpose. Within these provinces a God of Compassion was missing. Which didn't necessarily negate the validity of this experience.

Al was determined to take the supernatural on its own terms. He was used to disappointments in his life and here was another. It was no big deal, actually. But he would have liked to see a castle made of gold that housed a throne that stretched past the sky's horizon. The man sitting on the throne would have a beard a thousand feet wide. Something like that perhaps. Or maybe even slightly more absurd.

The satellite facsimile had morphed into something gross and organic, like an Aflatoxin spore blown up to huge proportions. There were hairs protruding from its many contours and sebaceous oil oozing from a crack in its center.

"What does he want with me?" Al asked Shane then found himself beginning to float up to him. Well, it would all be revealed shortly to him, he supposed. In a way he was satisfied with goings-on around him. He thought himself happy to be at an end with this thing, his life. Maybe Shane or somebody else would offer him a final explanation. But if that didn't happen, he was OK with the final outcome. He supposed a half-truth was better than a complete lie.

He was simply glad others were there to witness his moment of election. The problem is all these shadow people seemed to lack faces. He stared

down at them as he disappeared up the silo. He wondered what sort of people they had been before they came to this place.

Chapter Seven: The Devil Was Once

I.

On the flight home from Modesto, Agent Plan contracted a headache. It grew progressively worse until eventually he had to be sedated.

Ordinary Tylenol wasn't enough in this instance. One of the flight attendants had some Ambien for her personal use. She gave Agent Plan a double dose and mixed it with vodka. Then, when he had settled down somewhere over the Rockies, they strapped him into his seat and kept careful watch on him.

Apparently, something that had dwelt inside Peter was trying to get out. The passengers saw its outline in the distorted contours of his face.

Peter vomited black bile indifferently so that it rolled down his chin like an infant's mush at breakfast. Soon he began to speak in a guttural tongue. To many, it seemed like English being played backwards as in the background of *Stairway to Heaven*.

This was just before he was administered the Ambien and vodka cocktail. The flight staff didn't give a damn that this mixture was contraindicated. They didn't give a damn if it killed him. They thought it was better than the alternative. They thought he was some kind of possessed monster

and they were trapped with him at thirty thousand feet.

Plasticine motherfucker with a big brown tongue, a forgery of a forgery basically, Peter Plan thought, once he had come to his senses.

Right off the plane he had been transferred to Bethesda Naval Hospital in Maryland for close observation in an underground ward that less than thirty people in the country knew about. Presently he was isolated in a private cell at the ward's end. Protruding from the ceiling and walls were nozzles whose pipes led to a cyanide pellet and acid contraption identical to the type found in gas chambers. The government was not fucking around here to put it mildly. They knew the dangers inherent in this type of malady. They thought: better an isolated tragedy than the Apocalypse. They thought they had it all under control.

An hour after Agent Plan arrived in the facility, Deputy Director Phil Sane was by his bed.

"If he so much as gestures toward you, empty your clip into him," the Director told the two guards, MPs from the adjacent base.

One of them asked Sane about the protocol if the room was sealed with them in it.

"If you have extra ammo, I'd reload," he said. "To use on yourself, that is. You don't want to wait for the cyanide cloud to take you if you can help it," he told them. "It's not a pain free death. You *certainly* don't want to give yourself to the tender mercies of what's on the bed," he told them. "There are so many things worse than death and you'll be trapped in the room with one of them. If you can help it, you should be dead by the time it wakes. You shouldn't risk the possibility of being revived," he said. "You have no idea of what awaits you on the other side of the vale."

Fortunately for all parties concerned, when Agent Plan awoke, Phil Sane was at his bedside with the MPs stationed outside.

"Tell me what you saw," he said to Peter without offering any words of condolence. Prior to assigning him this case he had made it clear to the Agent that he was one cog in a vast cosmic apparatus. Well, they all were. The individual was nothing when compared to the collective. We were all individual thoughts within the mind of God. It didn't matter that one of these thoughts might be erased as another would take its place soon enough.

To record Peter's vision for himself, if not for posterity, the Deputy Director first unfolded then sharpened one end of a paper clip.

"You talk and I scratch," he told Peter and began to cut the skin in Peter's palm and upper forearm. The glyphs that the wounds would create eventually were apparently a form of shorthand. He didn't want to risk so much as a pen and notepad coming between him and Agent Plan's recollection. He would feel every notation as well as see them. This he saw as conscientious recording.

Just after gaining altitude in the chartered G4, Agent Plan recalled a stirring inside his chest cavity.

"It didn't hurt, at least initially," he said to Director Sane. "I attributed it to gas initially," he told him. "And so I wasn't remotely motivated to ask for assistance or request that we turn back."

This was beside the point to Phil Sane. He didn't care at all about Agent Plan's level of physical distress. He wasn't goddamned Florence Nightingale. He was interested in the vision, rather. What it meant and what it portended for us all.

"The first thing I saw," Peter said, "was the plastic monster with the fecal tongue."

The cut Phil Sane made on Peter's upper palm raised three parallel lines, one of which was slightly smaller than the other.

An abomination so it might be called, this monster, according to Peter. It was something not produced either by nature or manufacturing but by some unholy alliance between them.

"Recall that I was narcotized," Peter said. "So, I can't say for sure that I'm remembering right."

According to Phil Sane, it was impossible to misremember a vision. These images and figments were far realer than ordinary perception. They dreamed you, not the other way around.

Agent Plan said that the demon in front of him was fake and septic at once.

"I felt sure that if I stayed there more than a few seconds, I would be destroyed," he told the Director. "Not attacked or murdered," he said to Phil. "But rather subsumed. I mean, ordinary people weren't supposed to look at something so hideous," he said. "It was nothing of this earth and nothing of this universe, I'm sure," he said. "Couldn't have been. It didn't make any sense. It wasn't something any rational system, be it spiritual or natural, could ever produce. It was vulgar yet dead. It was just an extreme thing for an ordinary person to have to witness without guidance from a higher power."

Its fabricated nature somehow validated the necrosis that puddled in its plastic pores. It infiltrated Peter's psychology immediately. When after a minute in its presence he cried out for God to help him, he didn't know who he was talking about. The creature had deadened him inside. It had made him blind to God's Love. It was then that he began to long for death, to be killed. But this creature was less than merciful. It simply stared ahead and subsumed. It wouldn't kill so much as absorb. It

would leave a spark of being in the body it took over if only to torture it until the End of Days.

Within that state, Peter said, time disintegrated.

"It could have been two minutes or a thousand years," he said to Phil. "There was nothing to mark time by and I was neither living nor dead. It's impossible to say when it ended. I'm here now, aren't I? So, I suppose it ended. But there's no narrative to provide beyond that fact. Events happened, but in no particular order," he said. "And it makes me wonder if that was only act one in a multi-act play."

Phil Sane did not record this last statement of Peter's as he didn't care for idle speculation about whatever it was. Above all creatures in the universe, the Director knew about what the agent spoke. So, he didn't have to speculate. Presently he was pressing Agent Plan for any sort of utterance coming from the creature. He wanted to know about any words spoken in English. He was steering him towards the recognition of a particular soliloquy from history. Dutch Schultz, the Jewish gangster, was America's true poet of the absurd. Buchalter's men filled him with lead, and he sang his *Iliad* to an audience of indifferent coppers. Phil was pressing Peter to detect similarities between one soliloquy and the next. Thus far, Peter had said nothing about what he had heard. He was overcome at this demon's hideousness. But, to judge by Phil Sane's reaction, this was neither here nor there.

*Fire. Factory. No, no. There are
ten million fighting somewhere. Police
are here. Communists. Strike. Please,
let me get in and eat. Let 'em harass
and bother you. Don't ask me to go
there, I don't want to. Get 'em out of
my way.*

When Phil was done with Peter, he stepped into the hall and turned towards the MPs.

"Is there a first aid kit around here?" he asked them. One of them pointed at the medical closet directly adjacent from them. Immediately the Deputy Director started rummaging around in its confines.

Phil retrieved gauze bandages and applied them to Peter's wounds. He carefully pressed down on each before removing it.

"Making an imprint for posterity," he told the MPs after inspecting the blood stains made therein. "With this type of investigation," he said, "you leave no stone unturned. Blood itself is a far more reliable recorder of an event than ink or a digital image. You must realize that in a realm of magic conventional police methods fly out the window. Blood and earth are elemental objects. Thus, they are less susceptible to manipulation than binary code."

As he talked Director Sane carefully inspected the blood etchings he made on the bandage.

"You need reliable recordings of past events to ascertain a baseline for reality," he told Peter. "To proceed, you need to be convinced that you are real even as you become convinced that others are not. You wake up within a new form or wake up to nothingness. It's not up to you to determine. You accept the reality placed before you with quiet stoicism regardless of your internal objections. You do so to avoid having them say of all human beings that they abandoned all dignity once exposed to a Higher Power."

Phil's mission was more existential than criminological. It always was. The investigation had finally reached a point where he didn't mind saying this was so. He felt that Peter Plan had failed. But, then again, he likely had no chance to succeed. He

was after all just a man. What he reasonably could have done he had already done. He had survived his encounter with the Eternal. So far. He had reported on it faithfully. Now Phil had hard evidence in the form of a blood transcription to take back to his superiors. He thought at the very least they would be mollified as to the efficacy of the Deputy Director's efforts.

His superiors assumed all this time that the case was as good as bungled. They had assumed Levi Tate was playing the two agents for fools.

They didn't see him as amenable to manipulation from low-level FBI personnel. What cooperation he was sure to offer would only taint the investigation further. But at least Tate had shown his hand to them. This might have been intentional on his part but likely he had simply let down his guard to push Peter over the edge. Like Dutch Schultz, Peter had let down his guard only for a little while and that had been enough. Presently the case was in official hand-off mode. Director Sane would be the Agent of Record from here on in. This was as his superiors had wanted all along. They thought a great reckoning was in store for the world. That the old way of existing was being plowed under. If this happened, their mission was to preserve as much information as possible about the old ways. But Agent Plan wasn't clued into any of the implications of his work. For example, he still used his digital recorder to take notes. He didn't understand that such a device was worse than useless in such an investigation. It simply mirrored what a particular version of events might be. It didn't take into consideration that it was reality itself that might be compromised. It lacked the intuition to be able to peer into the cracks that a given reality might contain as it was hastily assembled and arbitrary.

None of this was Peter's fault as he hadn't been briefed as to the true nature of the investigation he was opening.

"Same orders as before," Director Sane said regarding Agent Plan's treatment. As far as Phil was concerned, Plan had been corrupted by the forces he was fighting. Post-vision, he didn't trust Peter any more than he did Levi Tate. Peter had sacrificed himself for the FBI and deserved a place of high honor in its memory. This didn't change the present opinion that Phil held of Peter. Which was that he was irredeemably corrupted.

Phil Sane thought at some point Agent Plan would have to be liquidated if only to quarantine the infection present within his imagination. As far as Phil knew that when the body died the spirit died along with it. In other accountings of reality this was not so. There, external reality was essentially a blank slate that could be populated with objects from the mind. This was a disastrous situation for those interested in containment. In such a situation, reality turned brackish. It became a mixture of figment and matter.

Once this occurred no quarantine was possible. Reality was beyond saving once corrupted by the filth of the mind. So it was that all reality must be extinguished if the contagion was to be contained. Phil Sane hoped it wouldn't come to that. He hoped if only for his own sake that he wouldn't be forced to slam the door shut and let the cyanide gas cloud form. He had his own blood etching to measure the world against. If similarities between what was inside Peter Plan and what was outside made themselves known, he would pull the plug immediately. He felt it was the best thing for all concerned, considering the gruesome alternatives. He thought himself a good person in the fight for good. Of course, it frequently occurred to him that

he too was in the midst of being manipulated. He was utterly dedicated to a methodical investigation, therefore. He would do his best knowing it was a losing battle. And in the end the decision he made to pull the plug would be made absent of malice for all parties concerned.

Phil's eyes were constantly requiring attention as they were, strictly speaking, not of this earth. They were alien creatures unto themselves. Each eye was possessed of independent will. They required constant lubricating to keep from drying up and fissuring. Functionally blind, they only worked when Phil was asleep. The Director navigated by sonar like a bat. The eyes didn't perceive ordinary objects but the dream figments that had escaped into waking day and were distinguishable to others.

Sane tilted his head back and used gravity to deposit a series of blue drops in his eyes. When he was finished, the bunker and the entirety of the Bethesda base had disappeared. Now, somehow, he could see in earnest. He blinked and stared at the wounds along his arm. Then he stared as slowly they began to rearrange themselves into glyphs quite different than the ones he had created moments before.

II.

This macadam road Agent Ng was on in northern New Hampshire had a name but not a designation on a map. That is, somebody had named it and put up handmade signs at five-mile intervals driven into the stony topsoil at various angles suggesting a certain haste in deployment:

**Yellow Brick Rd.
“Courtesy of Munchkin Enterprises”**

The sign was situated in front of a grove of firs that marked the road's end. Beyond it a traveler would have to walk. The grove yielded to a meadow on whose northern flank sat a large pond.

The mobile home sat on the pond's edge on the other side from the dead-end road. Here was a lozenge of aluminum that wore an exterior of rust like a widow wore a veil. It was a deeply sad object. It communicated life's transient nature to its very few human observers. On the other hand, the nature that surrounded it was sublime. A person moved out here for the surroundings not the interiors. Scenic Mt. Washington loomed in the background. And the pond's surface was dotted with mallards and geese.

The upturned milk crate in front of the mobile home's door likely doubled as a step and porch for whoever lived inside.

"I'm looking for Jane Plante," Bea Ng said to the home's resident when balancing on the crate. Seeing a shape move on the other side of the curtain, Agent Ng had knocked incessantly while keeping a hand on her semi-auto. She knew the thorny reputation of residents of the Live Free or Die state. If they fired at her she would fire at them. And it wouldn't be a warning shot.

The old woman who had answered the door was unarmed as it turned out save for a potato masher she was using on wild blueberries in service of a compote.

"It's not that I didn't hear you," she told Bea of her tardy response, "so much as I was unprepared to hear."

She told Bea that out here in the middle of nowhere visitors were not only unexpected they were not considered a possible phenomenon.

"I thought you might have been a black bear," she said, "looking for a free hand out."

She asked Jane if bears were plentiful in this woods and Jane Plante said that they weren't.

"That don't mean you take them for granted by way of leaving food outside," she told her. She said that what garbage she produced was routinely buried or burned in a pit out back. She had a rifle somewhere in the trailer but had fired it only once her life. Rather she relied on fate alone to preserve her from the forces of the wilderness. The good thing about a New Hampshire winter was that it dampened down the predatory instincts of the local faunae. In winter, you basically had to worry only about winter. But living off the grid as she was out here, she found this was enough to occupy her days fully.

She had an ATV out back that pulled a trailer that she would use to import her heating oil from the village ten miles away. Shut in during winter sometimes for weeks at a time necessitated that she keep an enormous larder. Not infrequently she would be forced to strap on snowshoes and walk the three-quarters of a mile to where the Yellow Brick Road ended. She had arthritis in both knees and the hike out to where the ATV was stored took forty minutes there and sixty minutes back. Nowadays the weather reports were reliable enough to give her several days warning when attempting to ride out a nor'easter. But every so often the snowshoes would have to be broken out and she thought it might have been more efficacious to learn how to use that rifle and freeze venison in case of a weather emergency.

She subsisted on social security she told Agent Ng. This was while making her coffee from an old-fashioned drip percolator. Social security and what remained of a survivor's benefit when the prop plane she was on in 1982 crashed a half mile outside of Nantucket.

"Everybody gone but me," she told Bea Ng who obviously knew of the tragedy. She was here on business and the file on Jane Plante had been committed to memory by her weeks before. But Jane didn't know of the file's existence. She didn't know how central she was to this unraveling mystery.

When the plane crashed, when it hit the water, it broke into hundreds of pieces and the flesh of the passengers fore and aft of her were flayed from the bone instantly. But she emerged from the wreck with nothing more than a concussion. It had only been years after the fact that the lead investigator for the FAA started asking questions. It would have been seen as uncouth to question a survivor's luck.

But according to him, this went beyond luck and into the mystical. He said the plane hit with enough force to kill every passenger nine hundred times over. He had done a force equation and come up with this exact figure. She should have been dead times nine hundred. Her own flesh should have been torn from her bones instantaneously. Then her bones pulverized to the consistency of chalk and sunk to the bottom of Nantucket Sound.

There was luck, was his point, and then there was the impossible.

"He was trying to accuse me of something, but I don't know what," she told Bea and poured the coffee with exquisite care. Touch of Parkinson's affecting her it seemed, in addition to the arthritis. These maladies were an effect of Adam's Sin according to Jane. They were part of the price we all paid for our race having fallen into disfavor with God. We aged and died because of Original Sin. And in between there was much anxiousness and pain. It could have been different had the apple not been plucked from the Tree of Life. On the other hand, perhaps the lineage of man might have stopped

with Adam if he hadn't bit the apple. Adam needed sin to propagate a race. His creator apparently was more comfortable with eunuchs. There would be no poetry or self-reflection possible without sin.

Jane Plante recalled for the agent the meeting she had with the FAA investigator at the agency's Boston branch near Logan Airport in 1984.

"They had a doctor there who wanted to take my pulse," she told her. "My pulse! As if that had something to do with anything. Well, I suppose they were grasping at straws by that point. I suppose they needed an explanation and were looking to create one. They didn't have a clue other than the interference from a higher power. But they couldn't declare this. There was no checkbox in any of their proposals marked for *God*."

There was a checkbox entitled *Unexpected Physical Phenomenon*. And that is what the investigators selected, noting in general detail the physics that had worked against Jane's survival.

"They left it at that at least officially," Jane told Bea. "For the next twenty years the lead investigator was in contact with me. He was pushing me into all sort of studies like the one at Duke University where they used an MRI machine to find the human soul. They said the soul was an oscillating blue pea somewhere in the pituitary gland. They said they wanted to check mine for signs of cancer."

Jane Plante knew that the soul dwelt somewhere precipitously lower. It was next to the liver's anterior lobe. She had once felt it attempting to take flight. It was formed into the shape of a wasp. And once it departed from the mouth it took flight as a wasp might, with stinger protruding from its thorax.

The FAA investigator died in 2005. His copious files on Jane and the accident were forwarded to the

FBI. Of more interest to Agent Ng than the plane crash Jane survived was her life from 1962 to 1968. Then, she lived at the Shaker Sabbath Day Lake Community in Northern Maine. She had left inexplicably after an incident involving the local postmaster, Ronnie Stotz. In 1967, Stotz had been found crucified in his office hard against the American flag. His eyes had been cut from him and his jaw dislocated. A message had been rendered in his blood on the office's parquet floor:

etiam diabolus angelus fuit

For a hermit like Jane Plante, time passed quickly. To the point that the concept (for this was all that time was, a concept) was rendered meaningless. However, even she was bemused at the fifty-year gap between incident and investigation. She asked Bea why the Bureau had delayed so severely. She recalled that when the Ronnie's body was found, the state police declared it the work of Portland-based hippies. Hippies were always in northern Maine causing trouble, claimed the state investigator. The lone detail Jane recalled about the state police detective was the extraordinarily short length of his trousers. The detective had striations of mosquito bites running the entire circumference of both bare ankles. And he didn't seem to give a damn about it.

"What else do you remember about the investigation itself?" Agent Ng asked her, after removing a paper clip from her pocket. She had yet to unfold it to make scratches on her skin. Perhaps she was waiting for actionable information to be provided before taking notes.

She remembered that a day before the postmaster Ronnie Szot's body was found so many birds fell dead from the trees at once.

"We were concerned about a contagion," she said to Bea. "It wasn't natural of course and we had no explanation for it. A week before, Mother Louise had a dream in which she envisioned Christ's Return. She envisioned it would happen somewhere in the Maine woods. She envisioned that when it happened everything would be different. Including our memories of the past."

The official name of the Shaker church was the United Society of Believers in Christ's Second Appearing.

"For us it was completely natural, not crazy at all," she told the agent after removing her gaze from a mallard just having landed on the pond. But she had been entirely sure that before touching the pond the mallard was a goose. Its white feathers had instantaneously gone black after the creature touched the water. This she thought was the most noxious effect of aging. That reality itself was coming undone in stages like the laces of a hastily tied shoe. She couldn't rely anymore on the sense data that flowed through her eyes and ears. She was functionally insane, in other words, though she might have taken issue with the characterization. She might well be forced to spend her remaining days in a nursing home. Therefore, she tried her best to ignore the incongruities placed before her. Perhaps all the bad stuff would go away on its own. It would be like a pestering bus passenger who might simply leave her alone if ignored.

Mother Louise's vision was similar to other Shaker visions that foretold the return of the Lord.

So, to throw one more revelation the centuries old pile of revelations was insignificant. If Jesus didn't return, the Shakers would make up an excuse for Him. It was as ever since Mother Ann founded their sect two hundred years back. No Shaker in their right mind would interpret the Christly vision

as a portent. Few frankly would have even doted on the information once it was shared.

The Will of God was beyond human comprehension. It could not be shared, let alone understood. God required no prophet. Therefore, none was appointed.

The devil, by contrast, in the Shaker imagining, had a PR firm working for him twenty-four/seven.

"When something portentous happens," Jane explained to Agent Ng taking care to avoid staring at the pond, "we see it as a portent. That was the simple folk we were. I've fallen out of the practice of belief since then," she told Bea. "Which was to say I was allowed to peak behind the veil and saw what there was to see. Once proof is furnished, you see, faith is useless. Probably all the residents of heaven are atheists."

Bea Ng looked up from her coffee.

"God hides His Face as a means of generating interest in Him," she said. "He's a publicity whore."

"Yes, that's right," Jane Plante said. "What is present after a while becomes commonplace. Commonplace and therefore dreadful. That's the other reason God hides His Face. I think it has everything to do with the truth that all experience is fundamentally banal. Probably the Kingdom of God is a place where everything is forgotten within five minutes. To keep the experience fresh and exciting everything must be forgotten constantly."

What Agent Ng was most interested in, however, was the postmaster's body. Its disposition, more specifically, just after being discovered.

I didn't find it," Jane Plante said. "So, you're barking up the wrong tree."

Beatrice Ng had long ago committed to memory the body's discoverer. But she intentionally fumbled over a name.

“Eli Woolstencroft,” said Jane Plante. “Our Brother Eli. He’s dead now,” she told her. “By his own hand, I believe. Though you would know better than me.”

Jane had left Sabbath Day Lake in the Spring of 1968 several months after the body’s discovery. Agent Ng wanted to know if these events were related. This had been her main reason for seeking Jane out.

Jane told her that her decision to leave had been long in coming. The real lever for her disillusionment with “The Community” as it called itself was Mother Louise’s increasingly erratic behavior during the span of 1967. She had apparently given herself over to the same dark God that had brought the contagion into being. She was making demands of the community that were profoundly un-Christian. She was articulating a notion of self-interest wrapped up in Christian piety. She didn’t seem to believe in much anymore.

“For example,” she said to Bea after refilling both their cups, “after she experienced her vision of Christ’s return, she wanted to have songs written in her honor. Not in God’s honor, realize, but hers. To a Shaker this is sacrilegious. She knew it was sacrilegious, but she wanted it anyway,” Jane said. “I think she had lost her faith by that point,” she told Agent Ng. “I think something happened to her and she was going through the motions concerning community leadership. Her vision of Christ was not the Community’s vision, at least not the vision laid out in the sacred writings. Something had gotten into her, and it might not be unrelated to the bird cull. She wasn’t the same after that. But to talk to her, an elder, and explain our trepidations to her was unthinkable. Sabbath Day Lake was not a place where you shared your feelings. Or even admitted you had any. You basically did what you were told.

And if you didn't like it you could leave. So that's what I did. I left. And this was after the body had been found."

According to Eli, Jane now remembered, the sockets where the postmaster's eyes should have been were riddled with honeycombs as if hosting Apoidean life.

"As far as I know the local cops took his statement and that was that," Jane said. "When I left, the post office still hadn't been reopened. Somebody told me it had burned to the ground years later. And the Community became scattered. I think there are only one or two old women now living in the entire compound."

When asked by Bea Ng to pinpoint the moment of Mother Louise's decline, Jane decided on a particular month in 1967. Coincident with that moment she recalled a visit from a young man they all took as a Canada bound draft dodger. He stayed with them for what might have been three weeks before disappearing one day into a snowstorm. No explanation for why he came or why he left. He never spoke and claimed through flip cards that he was deaf.

"I don't think he had a name," Jane said to Bea when asked by her if one can be recalled. "Well, I mean, sure he had one. He never gave us cause to ask what it was somehow. And even though we thought it was a draft dodge, the deaf-mute thing, he never gave himself away. He never let the mask slip from his face. He never let on that he was anything less than he said he was. He never gave us cause for alarm at least in our waking moments."

Now, Bea suggested, things were radically different.

"I dreamt of Jesus constantly in those days," Jane Plante said. "Though not in the way a Shaker is meant to."

Bea Ng looked up from her coffee grounds.

"Are there different way of dreaming?" she asked Jane.

"Of course," said Jane Plante. "Hasn't it ever occurred to you?"

Beatrice Ng admitted that she did not dream herself. Because, being a tulpa, she herself was of a dream and thus she was incapable of the act.

"Do you have a soul?" Jane Plante asked her.

"Probably not," Bea said. "Probably not in the way you're using the word."

"I think you're lucky that way," Jane Plante said.

Bea Ng asked her how come.

"The soul is the first thing to die," Jane told her. "The first organ to suffer permanent damage in this life. Once it dies you walk around with a dead thing inside you. For the rest of your life. It rots and the stench is forever with you. And you jump up and down and it rattles around in your head."

III.

The cards from the deaf-mute society Jane and Bea eventually exchanged had identical messages on it:



Those cards in Jane Plante's possession were discovered in her desk drawer having turned yellow

with filth after all these decades. The cards in Bea Ng's possession by contrast were relatively new. She had stolen them from Peter Plan while in the Kansas supermax. She was fairly sure he would have wound up throwing them away otherwise. He had no idea what he had been given. In all candor he had lost the thread of the investigation by that point.

"The only reason I kept them around as long as I did," Jane said to Agent Ng once producing her cards, "is I needed the physical evidence to recall what happened. If I didn't have them everything could have been considered a dream," she said. "I don't think there's a single person left alive to corroborate anything I witnessed. But I saw it and I needed to be sure that I saw it. I needed something to tell me I wasn't crazy. I wasn't sitting somewhere else all the while. Like in a rubber room."

When asked by Jane what she thought the cards meant, Bea said she had certain unproven theories about this.

"I don't think the young man you saw was human," she told Jane. "I think he came to where you were intentionally rather than having detoured there on the way to someplace else. If only because he was incapable of doing anything unintentionally, he came to you intentionally. He wanted to send a message to you and perhaps to me as well. He is a being that doesn't distinguish between time periods. To him, a thousand years is the same as the time it takes to walk across the room. And I think he can see across this room past a thousand years in a single frame. He knew we would be here talking to each other at this moment, for example. He knew in advance every syllable that came from our mouths."

He was neither good nor evil. This was in the same way that a hurricane was neither good nor evil. He existed merely, resultant from primordial

circumstances. He did what he wanted with humans. If he had a plan, it was indecipherable to men. It was useless to even inquire about why. He wasn't a criminal so much as a fickle God.

There would be no arrests made in this case. But Agent Ng was an investigator who had sworn an oath. She needed to follow up on every lead possible. If only because of the oath she swore she wanted to make sure that truth would out.

"What's happening to the world of late?" Jane asked Bea, referring more to her little corner of it than the case Bea was in the middle of. "I mean, nothing makes sense anymore. It's like watching a movie where another crazier movie has been spliced in. And the audience has lost the narrative about what's happening. It's stopped being a story so much a bunch of random scenes piled on top of each other in some random way."

Bea's answer was maybe it had always been this way. But she had only been recently made aware of it.

"Whoever created the universe," she said, "didn't mean for it to make easy sense. I mean that's one thing you can say about it. It's not laid out there easy for somebody to follow. It's not supposed to be some commercial production with a clear beginning, middle, and end."

Taking Jane's old flip card in hand, Agent Ng retraced her path around the pond taking time to stare at its placid surface. There were no mallards and geese there just then. Nor, to the best of her knowledge, was there ever. It was a calm glass-like surface that seemed hard as an opal. It seemed that if one tried to jump into the pond, one instead would bounce along its surface. Nothing was supposed to dwell within it, and nothing did. It felt to Bea like an immutable law. She didn't ask Jane Plante if she thought this was so. She didn't believe (and really

couldn't believe) that perhaps five minutes ago it was any different.

Once finding her way back to her motel that overlooked a lake, Bea Ng stared into the middle distance of her black room for twenty minutes. As ever she was neither depressed nor excited but blank and slightly anxious about the future. Realizing that whatever would be would be, nevertheless, she was hardly excited about that news. She felt that the prestige of the Bureau had taken a beating because of this investigation. No explanation had been found concerning Levi Tate's seeming omnipotence. Now, Peter Plan, the lead investigator, was seemingly permanently incapacitated. This too was a mystery for all but the select few in the Bureau. Bea assumed he would be diagnosed with a nervous breakdown, but she also assumed that this was the cover story for whatever was actually wrong with him. She had her theories that counted as little as anybody else's theories in this matter. Over the span of so many decades she had learned not to speculate. She might see Peter again eventually and he would tell her what happened. But when dealing with instances of true mental illness, firsthand testimony was notoriously unreliable. It would most certainly not boil down to any one thing. She assumed that he was possessed. She assumed him merely as one who suffered and would continue to suffer terribly. She thought he needed to be relieved of pain absolutely in any way.

Her progenitor, though hardly her parent, Lady Margaret Wallington, had been in pain too. This was what had spurred her to make the then enormously difficult trek to Lhasa, Tibet in 1922. She was accompanied by three Bhutanese Sherpas and her houseboy, Michael Refuge, who was undoubtably the most mystifying character in the universe at that moment and perhaps still is. Michael was in

possession of alabaster-colored skin and a mouth that was kept covered by a silk scarf for reasons known only to him. He walked around barefoot on dainty feminine feet even in frozen Himalayan passes. He suffered no ill-effects from frostbite as judged by careful inspection from western medical doctors. The Sherpas called him a *yidag*. Which meant a hungry ghost (though he didn't conform to such a creature's parameters). The high llama who first received them in Lhasa called Michael *Dorje Shugden*. Which meant something else entirely.

Her agony was not caused by some physical ailment.

"She was empty and afraid, aware she was alive but unaware of its purpose," she told her own self twenty minutes in the future. She had this ability to communicate with her future self. By doing so she had constant companionship wherever she ventured. Twenty minutes from now, she would hear her voice emerging from out of nowhere and immediately forget she had spoken these words. Remembering her original utterance would cause a logical loop to form that might, as averred to by her master llama, bring the universe down around her ears. She needed to talk in the past and be unaware she had done so in the future. It was easier to forget than to remember.

She didn't mind, she was up for surprises and once the moment passed, she would assure herself that she was not haunted by ghosts. There was a logical explanation for everything and here was one of them. She wouldn't have tried it at all but in times of crisis she felt the need for a confidant. She never had a friend, and this was the mystical compromise she had worked out. She would talk to herself and she would listen to herself. And then twenty minutes later everything would be forgotten.

Before coming to Lhasa, Lady Margaret had no notion of Tibetan Buddhism outside the books available on the subject in England.

"She resolved to absorb all the knowledge the llamas had to offer," Agent Ng told herself, using thoughts as opposed to words. "She said she would die on the cold stone floor that they used for mediation rather than leave the temple unenlightened. She was an adept, but she was far behind even the youngest students steeped in the tradition," Bea said. "Meditation was a hard practice to master for one so excitable as Lady Margaret. She always thought sitting still was a practice associated with subservience. However, the monks were patient with her and let her remain. With three years she became enough of a master to not require constant attention by the Master. Within five years she became a *Geshe Lharampas*, a high dharma master and able to teach others in the practice."

Other people might have left in triumph after such achievement. But Lady Margaret remained in Lhasa another six years, alternately venerating and venerated, until she mastered every aspect of the dhamma. Frankly she had nowhere to go if she left. Her father had long since disowned her and withdrew financial support from her after she left her fiancé at the altar. She had no skills, no real friends to turn to in the West. Moreover, she didn't feel comfortable in the West. She felt that she had returned home once she had crossed the Tibetan border. It was only through her mastery of the dhamma that she learned how this could be true. She was the reincarnation of some unnamed bodhisattva, retuned to provide teaching to seekers after enlightenment. Her purpose here was divine, therefore, and unattached to matters of physical comfort. It didn't matter if she lived or died, her mission would continue after death. Some other

person would be reincarnated as the bodhisattva (the lord of all compassion). Her own lifeline was attenuated and, therefore, insignificant. But she never thought of dying as a sacrifice in the Christian understanding of such. She thought it was another bend in the river merely onto to its inevitable destination. It wasn't worth speaking about let alone fretting over. Life for Lady Magaret was useful only when it served the dhamma. Months would pass in the monastery where she could not recall her name.

Her trips onto and above the astral plane became increasingly frequent in those years. These lasted sometime (in ordinary time) several weeks. During the period, Lady Margaret's body would be tended to by the monks. And when she rose from her prayer mat, she was discovered to have suffered no ill-effects of her trip. It was as if she had been lying there less than twenty minutes.

"Those days she talked frequently to the monks about the reality in which we are all trapped," Bea said to herself citing her own monk-given education. "Lady Margaret wanted to create, not merely see," she said. "The monks were perplexed why this might be. They had no intention of changing the universe. Rather, they were seeking relief from it. They were after all part of the world. They didn't seek to remove themselves from it. The idea of proactive will was anathema to them. They were not builders, hardly politicians. To a man they saw politics as the opposite of spiritual attainment. They didn't understand the need to change anything."

Bea Ng recalled herself for the moment of her birth on a particularly cold day in the winter of 1927.

"We opened our eyes as if a person momentarily having gone to sleep and awakened with a jolt. We found it strange how we couldn't remember our name and where we were exactly. We rose and noticed the cold against our skin. Why was that?

Why was the world excessively cold instead of excessively hot? At the time we had no explanation for it. But the room was dark, and we were in a chair. There was a door on the other side of the room with light pouring through underneath. To us it was an invitation to walk into it. And once we were there on the other side the head llama received us and wrapped us in a blanket. We were told that we were not of this earth. No, not of this earth. Lady Margaret was there on the floor insensate. The llama explained she would not receive us. She was our creator, he said, not our mother. The difference being a creator is often indifferent to its creations. To her we were just another dream, that had slipped through the membrane from the astral plane to earth. The llama welcomed us to stay and took us to a room on the far side of the building. There we would remain in various states for the next thirty years. By the time we emerged, Lady Margaret was dead. She never once asked after our well-being. Though in fairness to her she seldom asked after the well-being of her own blood kin as well."

A tulpa was a dream come to life. It had human shape and human flesh. Fundamentally it was an abomination. The natural order abhorred such a creature and generally they didn't last long. In Tibetan Buddhist practice, it was the responsibility of the tulpa's creators to kill it. They did so by taking a sacred knife and plunging it into the four secret places within the tulpa's body. Afterwards, they were supposed to say a simple prayer and the body would disappear back from whence it came. Once escaped into the general population, tulpas were generally indistinguishable from ordinary people. Their one distinguishing characteristic was their violent detestation of country music. Yes, they hated country music with a passion that would make a typical urban snob envious. It was the old

stuff, the classic country of Roy Acuff and Hank Williams that vexed them the most. Hank Williams in particular was like garlic to a vampire for them. Hank was a man with a great human soul. *A universal heart*, one critic once put it, and his suffering became all men's suffering, and thus the expiation of all men's suffering when the words were found to objectify the pain they all felt:

*The silence of a falling star/
Lights up a purple sky/
And as I wonder where you are/
I'm so lonesome I could cry*

Nowadays, Bea Ng walked around with a pair of noise cancelling headphones in her purse just in case a Hank Williams song should reveal itself to her in its raw horror. Thankfully, Nashville had all but abandoned its greatest star for so much commercial dross. But every so often when crisscrossing the country in her duty as a special agent, a college radio station would put one of the King of Country Music's songs on the turntable. The possibility spooked Bea to such a degree that when she drove by herself, she never turned the radio on. She could hum (non-country) songs to herself to keep the boredom at bay. She didn't see it as a handicap so much as a minor eccentricity. Most people hated classic country music anyway, so they didn't see this aversion, if it was announced to them, as especially weird. Nowadays, many people were becoming more tulpa than human. They were soulless and hollowed out as one of Apple's phones. She couldn't help wondering if this was Levi Tate's doing. He had cast so many spells upon the world and now others were succumbing to them. Like tulpas or iPhones, modern men lacked souls. They weren't able therefore to transcend the

circumstances that the Overlords of the Universe had created for them. It was tragedy and farce all in one, Bea felt. Men had a chance to embrace the Lord but turned their back on Him. And where God was absent, the devil held sway.

Agent Ng wrote her report concerning her interaction with Jane Plante. Afterwards, she sat up all night in the full lotus staring at the static on the TV with its coaxial cable pulled from it. Did you not know that part of this interference was the afterbirth from the universe's creation twenty-five billion years ago, the so-called Cosmic Background Radiation that pervaded every nook and cranny of existence in the present day? You wanted to look upon the greatest miracle of all, the ex-nihilo of all creation? Unplug the co-ax and stare at the TV's static. Patterns could be divined in the chaos if you were sensitive enough to them. For in the beginning existed the middle and the end. Every particle in creation was set forth on a pre-determined path, absent of swerving. The Naked TV was an oracle from which the future can be divined. That is, if you were sensitive to the patterns therein.

Six AM brought a call from Deputy Director Phil Sane. He was demanding an update on the case thus far.

"The postmaster's body," Director Sane said resetting the conversation. "Was there a photo taken by the coroner? Was there some sort of policeman's sketch we have to go by?"

The one photo Bea was able to access was a crime scene picture taken by the local newspaper photographer on assignment for the county. The hive pattern in Ronnie's eyes was more indicative of *polistes dominula* than *vespula*.

"It was something local in other words," she said to him. "For what's that worth."

Very little, according to the Director.

"What other forensics were run?" he asked. "Do we have a skeleton to exhume?"

For some reason, the Maine county that had jurisdiction preferred cremation of its murder victims. Against all responsible procedure.

"What are your next moves?" Phil asked her.

"*Etiam diabolus angelus fuit*," Bea Ng said. "I'm searching the casework for a referent."

"Don't bother," Phil said. "He's having fun with us."

"Fun?" said Bea Ng.

"It's his idea of fun, agent, not mine. *Even the devil was once an angel*. It's something a stripper would tattoo on her calf at five in the morning. It's a red herring. It's too obvious and too cryptic at once."

It was the wasps, the patterns in their nests, Sane was convinced, where the true communication was commenced with. He said the local Maine constabulary should be polled for a survivor from fifty years back to see if they remembered anything. Which was a Hail Mary if ever there was one. As your average seventy-eight-year-old goober might have a difficult time remembering his name let alone a single event that occurred decades back.

The only other corridor of investigation available was Jane Plante. Sane had read Agents Ng's report on her and found it somewhat promising. Especially the bit with the ducks on the pond.

"Next time," the Director said, "I'll come with you to the interview." Then he asked her about Jane Plante's present mental state.

"Distracted," she told him. "And old. Distracted and old."

"Maybe run a psychiatric eval on her," he said. "Maybe a brain biopsy, too. We need to see if anything's changed inside of her."

How was any of this possible under the U.S. Constitution Bea Ng wondered. She didn't ask the Director this obvious question as she assumed she would be told. Which was to say, the Director was making up the rules as he went along. Would Sane go so far as to biopsy a civilian's brain against her will? Maybe he planned on making Jane an offer she couldn't refuse. Or maybe he planned on just extracting her from her trailer one evening. This was an activity that the Deep State specialized in according to current Internet rumor. Might have been he was just thinking out loud, so no harm no foul. But Bea didn't see the Director as the type to engage in idle speculation with underlings. More likely, the horrible truth was that he knew something about the world that she didn't. Which was that nowadays civil liberties were imaginary. Lip service only needed to be paid to them and then only with the public at large. Everybody was terrified nowadays for some reason. The notion of a free republic would be mothballed until the case was solved. And that looked like it would not happen for centuries.

When fighting a losing battle, it seemed to Beatrice, an agent must have pre-determined what she was willing to do even while defeat was guaranteed. Director Sane had apparently made the decision for himself and Bea both. Despite Sane's forwardness, Bea decided she would not be a part of any warrantless kidnapping or whatever euphemism the Director wanted to use. Unlike Phil, she would be alive for quite a while. She needed to live with herself during the dark days ahead. In acquiescing to extra-legal means, she was inflicting as much damage on herself as on the Constitution. She would go into hiding before she was forced into that duty. And she would report such goings on to any

supervising power if any could be said to exist in this latter day.

In the meantime, she had to play along for want of any firm evidence against Sane.

According to Phil Sane, Levi Tate was scheduled to be executed by cyanide gas pellet the day after tomorrow.

"The thing you want to do," he told her before the call ended, "is put at least five hundred miles between you and the gas chamber in Kansas," he said. "We've tried to talk Kansas officials out of it but the game's gone on too long," he said. "The one thing you need to know is that it's not going to go as expected. They have no idea with whom they're dealing," he said. "They think they have it all in hand and killing him is the end of their problems. In reality, it's the worst possible thing they could do. At best, they're justifying Tate's misanthropy, giving him an excuse to sink further," Phil said.

"At worst," said Bea Ng.

"At worst," Phil said, "they're opening Pandora's Box. It's a cosmic trigger of some kind," he told her. "It's the moment his life and our lives have been pointing towards. And you can speculate it's the reason he became a serial killer at all."

Nothing that those in the know could do. Even the governor of Kansas was in a froth about Tate's continuous existence. Agent Plan hadn't helped matters any with his overpromising about a quick resolution to the cold cases. Director Sane confessed to Bea that he had hatched a plan about springing Tate from lockup before he could be killed. The problem resided in his inability to trust Levi. He might well refuse to be sprung. He didn't give a damn about his present incarnation. He genuinely thought it was funny that they were trying to ice him. He was genuinely looking forward to what came next.

Agent Plan would definitely be missing from the observation room when the pellet dropped. He was non-compos mentis. He was entering a state by slow degrees identical to one of Tate's victims. This is a hybrid state between a human and a cipher. He was under strict quarantine for the duration. He dreamed. And as he dreamed, he infected. Nobody knew this better than Phil Sane. He was truly afraid of Peter though he would die before he admitted that this was the case.

Bea asked to see Agent Plan or at least talk to him via phone.

"Eventually," Phil told her, "He or whatever is left of him will seek you out. At which point you and him can talk as long as you want. You'll have all the time in the world."

In Sane's hand was the list of numbers from the Zimmerman Telegram that he had torn from Peter's office wall. Sane had long since committed each of these numbers to memory. He was presently recalling the possible variants resultant from known algorithms. He needed to be prepared for what came next. He assumed the end was nigh. But he wanted to go down swinging. Even Gods he believed were afraid of death. He wanted to kill one or two of the SOBs before they got their hands on him.

What a man needed to believe (and rest assured what a man would be made to believe by Prevailing Authority) is that the world was coming unraveled.

"Nothing is what it seems anymore and perhaps it was never what it seemed. But it definitely isn't what it seems now," said Deputy Warden Don Grey to a reporter from the *Dallas Morning News* with a hummingbird for a nose while huddling over the observation room's kitchenette. Yes, a kitchenette. This supermax's gas chamber had been put to such extreme use over the years that the deputy warden and his staff felt the need occasionally to refuel with

snacks. They had Sugar Smacks in the cupboard and milk in the fridge. They had venison jerky in the pantry. This had been donated by various prison personnel back from their weeklong excursions out West.

After making hummingbird nose for a vegan, Don offered him the Sugar Smacks unalloyed by milk. He thought it was only friendly though it turned out the reporter had eaten on the way over. What exactly was his fare was anybody's guess. Don Grey conjectured birdseed and honey. If he liked venison, he would have been bowled over.

Don't judge a book by its cover, Don.

Well, he would have been bowled over, nevertheless. If a man was in possession of a hyena head where his liver ought to be and then you could declare he liked steak without hesitation. Exceedingly rare steak too, obviously. Which just went to show that you *could* judge a book by its cover. If in fact the cover was a hyena head featuring razor-like incisors in lieu of a byline and fierce yellow eyes in lieu of a title.

Anyway, nothing was what it seemed.

"In the old days," the Deputy Warden told the hummingbird specifically, speaking not to it specifically but through it "evil had a stolid nature. As if it was too obvious for this world and needed to hide in plain sight."

Don recalled the first execution he had attended under the tutelage (the wing as it were) of Warden Stiltz.

"This was a typical lover's triangle," he said, "in which one point of the triangle had taken a shiv to the other two."

The condemned killed the two lovebirds and set to their dismemberment expertly as if he was preparing charcuterie.

"I think it was this last touch, making a pâté from their livers and spreading it on a Ritz cracker that earned him the pellet drop," Don told hummingbird nose.

The Ritz cracker was gauche in the extreme according to the Oklahoma jury that sentenced him. If the condemned was more of a foodie, he might be alive today. This was in 1994 though it could have been 1744. Yes, the Hessians were rallying just outside Flanders. Don Grey recalled this with extreme accuracy. He tried his best to convince the Hessians to switch sides, but it was to no avail. Frederick the Second had put the fear of God into them. They were robotic extensions of his will.

What he remembered most about the condemned, the pâté spreader, was his aggressive embracing of the Holy Word all the way into the green cloud.

"They all come to Jesus, sooner or later," Don recalled to the reporter. With this dude, of course, it was too little too late. He wanted to take a Bible with him into the gas chamber, but this was nixed on account of the implied sacrilege. Up until the point when the paralysis hit his vocal chords he was quoting chapter and verse. Several surviving family members found this upsetting in the extreme and requested that he be gagged. According to Warden Stiltz, however, every man had the right to meet his Maker in whatever way he saw fit. He felt it wrong to gag a man for preaching the Living Word. Even if deep down he probably didn't mean it.

With Levi Tate, Don Grey supposed, there would be no such oratory to have to block out.

"They consider him a rough customer even by supermax standards," Don Grey told Birdnose.

Don watched him scrawl notes in a reporter's notepad. He wondered if the notes were in English or in some language comprehensible only by

hummingbirds. He thought at some point he would look over his shoulder and look. He expected something resembling hieroglyphs only more primitive. It might have been a dot-dot dash-dash confection mirroring the hummingbird's pitch changes. Or it might have been a series of perfectly spaced perforations made with a pen tip that admitted that the mastery of a true language was impossible for a creature with a brain the size of a marble.

The hummingbird had a name and a back story (though this was something for uncertain reasons the reporter was reluctant to reveal).

"Is there an official countdown before the pellet's dropped?" the reporter asked Don Grey in English. Cartoonishly adenoidal, his voice, though you couldn't hold that against him, given his "deformity." According to the reporter, the hummingbird had flown into his bedroom one morning and remained. It didn't seem especially comfortable, held captive by layers of human skin and cartilage that may well have formed over it when it was captured in the reporter's strangely sticky manifolds. Perhaps it hadn't been captured at all but had grown from a carbuncle on the tip of the reporter's nose. In this instance the reporter would be understandably reticent to admit it. His lack of a nose would be seen as a true disfigurement rather than a paranormal oddity. He couldn't bullshit his way past it with some Disney-like origin story. He would be sporting a tumor of a very alarming variety. And in such an instance he couldn't simply contend that this was the way God had wanted him all along.

In answer to his question, Don Grey said that there would be a silent countdown in the control room adjacent to the kitchenette.

"It's locked down when the chamber is in Occupied mode," he said to the reporter and pointed at the tiny chamber. Once hearing the cry *dead man walking!* coming from up the corridor, the Deputy Warden and a technician would enter the chamber. The curtains would be drawn from the outside so as forestall any sort of eye contact made by the condemned. A signal would be given to start the countdown once the chamber doors slammed shut.

Usually with ten seconds left Warden Stiltz would call into the chamber's control room telling them either to STOP or GO. As he was indisposed presently that control had been abandoned. In case of an emergency Don told the attending guards to start banging on the control room door to get him to STOP. There was actually a TV monitor in the control room showing a feed from a camera trained on Levi Tate. Out of superstition, neither the deputy warden nor the tech looked at the feed. They needed the footage just in case the ACLU should file suit. They needed to avoid further Eighth Amendment challenges that would otherwise slow the rate of executions. Under court order they had cut the cyanide with a bit of Neothyl to put the condemned to sleep first. But the mixture had never been tested. The sad truth was that those in the observation room generally wanted to see the condemned suffer. Where was the suffering in going to sleep and not waking up? Those in the observation room wanted revenge. To a person they couldn't delineate between justice and revenge. If justice was humane, they didn't want justice. So, Don made sure Neothyl flowed in exceedingly small amounts. Death by cyanide poisoning was agonizing. And the court order telling him to knock it off had not yet come down.

Don Grey had made Hummingbird Nose for a liberal from a hundred yards off. He asked him nonchalantly for his opinion on what was taking place.

"We all care very much about our public reputation," Don Grey said. "I mean, a supermax prison is the last line of defense for us all. What would happen if the public lost trust in its goings on? The incorrigibles here would have to be mainstreamed to other prisons. And the mayhem that followed might well spread into the entire system of criminal justice, rendering it beside the point."

Best thing the freak from Dallas could do was toe the line regarding death penalty promulgation.

"Think of you or yours having to face off with one of the monsters we warehouse here," Don told him pointing down the hall. "We have one fella here tortured old ladies to death with a rusty hook that he carried around in a knapsack. You asked him why and he couldn't say. The best he could offer is what's the point of killing without torture first? I mean it's like peanut butter without jelly. He thought it was a package deal. He thought the notion of killing was like the final act of a play. To him, it was a storytelling thing like a screen writer's desire to string the action along."

Fortunately, Don Grey said, you were about to meet the worst of the worst.

"Levi Tate, they tell me, has committed crimes which are literally unspeakable," Don Grey said to Bird Nose. "That is," he said, "the English language fails when attempting to describe them. He tortured by rape and murdered by torture. So, which is which? The maiming and the disfigurements of children were accomplished sometimes before life expired and sometimes after. He didn't have a true *modus operandi*. Which meant that he wasn't so

much driven by compulsion like other serial killers. He was nudged by boredom. He was the most culpable killer because he was the most indifferent about his actions. Some say he had an ulterior motive for his actions. He was into black magic or something. He did it for the pleasure and power alone."

Don told the writer that in fact he had not yet laid eyes on Levi Tate though he had been housed here for nearly two years.

"There was a fear of contamination or some such nonsense," he said, "amongst the higher-ups. The FBI especially. They kept him in a wing of his own, therefore. In a supermax's supermax you might say. There, my badge wouldn't work," he told Bird Nose. "So this is going to be a first for you and me both," he said. "I mean, who knows what's going to happen," he told the reporter. "Who knows what we're about to see five minutes from now when the escort ends."

Hummingbird Nose had several other questions for Don Grey, none of which he was inclined to answer now.

"Feel free to help yourself," he said to him pointing at the kitchenette. "I don't know what you like. I don't know if you eat for one or eat for two."

Responding to some ineffable stimulus from somewhere, the free wing of the hummingbird every now and again would begin to flap rapidly as to make a buzz. It ricocheted off the reporter's cheek and made the sound of thick pudding being hit with the outside of a metal spoon.

"Maybe he knows something you and I don't," Don said to the reporter concerning the recent hummingbird buzz. Apparently, Levi was coming. The hummingbird at the center of the reporter's face was attempting to high tail it out of there via a nearby window. But it was failing miserably.

Like all normal creatures it wanted to remain alive. It sensed death approaching somehow. Unlike the reporter, it was removed from any notion of valor regarding conduct in the shadow of the valley of death. Its instinct was geared purely to survival just as any other animal.

By the time the dull shouts of *dead man walking* infiltrated into the observation room, the hummingbird's wings had stopped flapping completely. It was as if it died. Or perhaps its spirit fled from its body temporarily. At least in one sense.

Then it escaped.

It had transcended the vileness of its immediate surroundings. And now the reporter was left on his own with what amounted to a dead mass in the center of his face. Apropos, one might say, given the company he was keeping. Though it was hard to tell the reporter was nonplussed by the departure. Apparently, this happened relatively frequently. He assumed at some point life would spring again.

He could have been wrong about this. Presently he gripped his reporter's notebook and stared down the hall. And then the control room door clicked shut.

Chapter Eight: Death and Transfiguration

I.

This was in a dive bar in the Tenderloin, June 1975. Unironic dilapidation was on display in this joint, featuring warped wood paneling and a pea green carpet that had seen its best days during the Summer of Love and declined steadily from there. Gallons of stale beer, Bloody Mary mix, piss (of course), black and brown Shinola, stains of shit from both dogs and humans, and approximately ten ounces of blood of various phenotypes culled from knife wounds and self-lanced ankle cysts, impromptu tattoos, a discarded tampon or two, and effluence from a presently dead hippie named Sand who one evening, apropos of nothing, began to vomit blood due to a series of bleeding ulcers and maybe, who knew?, a little spiritual intervention.

Really, who laid carpet in a bar? Regardless of the pretensions a prospective owner held for it (a class joint!), at best he was in for a series of escalating steam cleaning bills. Somewhere between Altamont and the first of the Manson Trials, the proprietor, Tony Godspeed, let the bar go to seed. He let *everything* go to seed for that matter,

riding the crest of an acid-induced revelation announcing itself as an indifference to the world-as-object in favor of the world-as-dream. June 1975 found Tony in the same mental state as in October 1969. Then as now he was massively down on social norms of every stripe. He thought at any moment Jesus would open the door and let His children in. This world was a fallen world, the nightmare that a man woke up to once the dream died. Within such a nightmare Tony saw no reason to keep up appearances for propriety's sake. Fuck 'em. Let 'em shut the bar down if they wanted. The city would padlock the entrance and Tony and his friends would break into the back entrance. A dump's a dump, but the Tenderloin in 1975 was likely the sleaziest neighborhood in the United States. South of Market nobody gave a shit about what you did and who you did it with. Or to. Needles were everywhere around, in the garbage cans and back alleys. Nobody cared about the dilapidated state of the bar. The carpet itself was a health code violation. Down here nobody gave a goddamn about such trivial matters.

It was an uncharacteristically warm day today, driven by a moderate southeast breeze.

"What the fuck is this, anyway?" Tony Godspeed said to his bartender, Theo Mott, and held up an invoice for beer. From the Carling Company this one, whose dirt-cheap products were a familiar offering at this public house. Bikers liked Black Labels and so did sailors and the Vietnamese refugees the army had warehoused temporarily at Mission Bay. Probably the Black Label the establishment served reminded them of the Saigon beer imbued with formaldehyde. Poverty was poverty, after all. Its attributes transcended national boundaries. Vietnamese pisswater didn't taste that

different from Canadian pisswater, likely. When you're broke one place was just as good as the next.

The invoice Tony was pointing to announced a credit to the bar in the amount of a hundred and eighty seven dollars ninety six cents. It didn't state a reason for this largesse. It didn't say that it had been overcharging Tony all along and now here was a legally mandated recompense absent any compounded interest.

Over the course of the last six years Tony's establishment, The Glass Half Full tavern, had purchased approx. 700 cases of beer from Carling Brewers. These were at what he understood to be a discounted rate.

"Now the motherfuckers are admitting what we've known all along," he said to Theo. "That they've overcharged us! I mean, where do they get the sack to just remit without apology," he told Theo. "Just a line item here with a plus next to the number! They'll blame it all on their accountants likely," he said. "They'll make it seem like an honest mistake. They'll blame anybody before blaming themselves."

Upon first seeing the credit, Tony had balled the paper up in his fist. This was before he realized it was needed if he was going to file a grievance. He had smoothed the paper up on the bar and held it up to available light. This was when he detected the strange watermark in the paper:



It didn't look like a marketing ID. He knew the Carling logo. In fact, its neon representation was placed in the bar's lone window. It didn't look like some business type of symbol like a Greek Delta. It

was prominently placed yet easy to miss. Therefore, Tony saw it as a mistake. And in a way this upset him more than the unexplained credit. He thought maybe they had taken the invoice from another company and neglected to change the logo. This would have been par for the course with Carling. Their deliveries were routinely late. And once years back a fistful of wasps had been discovered in the bottle in lieu of beer.

Rather than throw that bottle away, Tony put it on prominent display in the tavern above the bar. Into mysticism and the symbolic thought that it entailed, Tony Godspeed believed in auguries. The bee, if not the wasp, was a good luck sign in certain cultures. This was close enough as far as Tony was concerned. Over years the bottle had assumed a talismanic power with him. If there was a fire in here, the bottle would be the first and perhaps only object Tony would want to recover. He thought he owed everything to it (even though times were tough). The Vietnam War's clunky end had put the kibosh on Queen City partying at least for the short term. The goddamned Vietnamese had this ability to get supremely drunk off one beer. And even the SF bikers now were as much into amphetamines as beer. They thought of themselves as rebels without a cause. Suds tipping was too wholesome and American, circa 1975, for it to thrive in San Francisco. Ordinary folk tended to avoid the Tenderloin in particular like they did a knife-wielding lunatic with impetigo on his face.

Tony thought if it wasn't for the bee bottle (a bee bottle in his mind, as opposed to a wasp bottle in the mind of the universe), he'd be out of business right now. He was supremely irrational about it. Despite all appearances he thought magical forces governed the world. He'd rather consult a shaman about a health problem than a doctor. He was not

particularly bright. Supernatural explanations appealed to dum-dums because of their simplistic causality. Tony was a high school graduate but, let's face it, in this age that qualified you as only semi-literate. His favorite book was *Hot Humpin' Mamas* by one Barbara Boinck. He bought it in a porn shop just down the block. It was displayed next to a rack of dildos. Days and nights he would read the book and re-read. Open in the open! People gave him shit about it every now and again, but Tony was unmoved. He loved pornography like a long-lost son.

Limping over to the end of the bar where his boss was fulminating, Theo Mott asked to see the invoice.

"I see what you're driving at," he said eyeing the watermark. "But couldn't it be obvious? See the mark? It looks like two Cs facing each other."

Tony stared at the mark on the other side of the paper. "What the fuck you talking about, man?" he told Theo. "Two Cs? C,C?"

"*Carling Company*," Theo Mott said. "It's wishful thinking, maybe. But there it is. Your best explanation for a mystery."

This was a bullshit explanation, according to Tony Godspeed.

"In the first place, it's not a fucking C," Tony said to Theo tracing one rather gradual curve of the watermark. "Not a C. And then you got em facing each other and intertwined in this way. It looks like a fish hanging off a hook at a pier. It looks like some mark taken off a Viking ship maybe."

Theo was once in New York he told Tony. Above Times Square there was a DC Comics billboard On this billboard the D and C were at opposing angles.

"For a while you couldn't read it," Theo told Tony. "The D and the C. But I went into a comic store they told me it's the way they wanted it. It

was supposed to be a mystery to you. The idea was that they wanted you to look at it until it came clear. It was a riddle of some kind, according to them. They thought it was supposed to reveal some sort of truth if you stared at it long enough. It was supposed to mean something more than the letters that made it up."

Balderdash, as far as Tony Godspeed was concerned. All marketing was just mumbo jumbo. Along the same lines as microbiology and particle physics. Everybody knew the universe was a thought. It was empty of essence and thus able to morph spontaneously. There was no science possible within a dream. Absent of a fundamental reality, there was only subjective perception. And, according to Tony, quoting Bob Dylan, you didn't a weatherman to know which way the wind blows. Don't think, just be. He believed that with every fiber of his rickety being. He thought it was a dire mistake to read into things. According to Tony Godspeed, every low fool had Complete Knowledge at his grasp.

He didn't argue such matters as he felt generally there was nothing to argue about. But looking at the watermark even a smack-addled Tenderloin zombie could identify a dead fish hanging from a hook over two Cs in coitus.

"If it is there as you say," he said, to Theo, "then it's the fucking ugliest thing I've ever seen."

This was of course another assertion entirely. And it was one which Theo Mott was not geared to responding to. Truth be told, he knew exactly what the mark represented but didn't want to say. Tony had already lost his cool over the unaccounted credit. Theo didn't want him being subjected to excess worry. He didn't want Tony (as was his tendency in stressful moments) retrieving the bar's

rifle from the backroom and walking up and down Market Street trolling for eye contact.

The credit had been given at Theo's request. It had been granted once he had shown proof of all the broken bottles or otherwise tainted beer that had arrived from the Canadian brewery over the years. He had his dates and invoices in front of him when he made the call. Excluding the bee bottle, he had various samples of either accidental contamination or sloppy shipping practices fully preserved. He was ready for litigation if it came to that. It hadn't come to that fortunately for all parties concerned. Noting its high-volume business, The Glass Half Full had previously contacted the breweries' local distributor, Modesto-based Palsy Liquors. This establishment had accepted the amount Theo Mott quoted. They talked to Carling Distribution who promised the credit on the next invoice. It was all legitimate, all in a day's work so to speak.

But Theo realized Tony Godspeed had an anti-rationalist perspective. To him, things happened because they were fated to, not because a rational actor engaged with another rational actor and implemented a plan. The fact that Tony had been overcharged meant that there was some bad actor involved. Some bad juju had occurred. And now the juju's progenitor needed to be smoked out. There was not a single detail in the world that could be ignored as every detail flowed backed to some Prime Mover. Conspiracies were everywhere in the shape of vegetables and flowers and definitely in the invoices the bar was sent. For Theo to suggest otherwise to Tony would have been outrageous. It would have violated the sum of Tony's beliefs. The bar's rifle might well have been leveled at him. He had seen Tony Godspeed's violent moods. He thought they were to be strictly avoided, owing that

he was like a father to him. Tony had done more for Theo Mott than any other person in the world, his mother included. He had no intention of getting on his bad side.

Ever since coming back from 'Nam in '72, Theo had heard voices telling him to do things. The committing of any of these acts would have landed him on the wrong side of the law pronto. He had a nasty heroin addiction besides which needed to be seen to before he could reintegrate. Tony had given him a job and referred him to a methadone clinic in North Beach. He let him take as much time off as he wanted. He didn't give him shit when during one of several relapses, Theo had shown up to work wasted.

Theo was more than willing to let sleeping dogs lie if only because this was the prudent thing to do. But in this case, he was compromised. He had snuck behind Tony's back and negotiated for a credit. And if Tony pursued the matter himself, he would find out.

He would rage and start to throw items in the same manner that he had when he discovered that several Hell's Angels were using the bar's unisex bathroom to sell amphetamines. In that case there was nothing to be done but padlock the john until further notice. He had a notion to confront the SOBs who had done it, but Theo had talked him out of it. Of course, the Angels weren't to be intimidated. They didn't give a damn about a loaded pistol pressed to their nether reaches. They didn't see it as any faux pas to punch somebody in the face. Tony Godspeed would be risking something more than an ass whipping by kicking the Angels out. The California Angels Motorcycle Club saw themselves as above the law. They might on a dare torch the whole bar. Dissatisfied with that, they might seek

out any of the bar's survivors and enact rough justice.

The plan Theo hatched was for him to take the lead in the credit investigation and issue a false report to Tony about the Modesto distributor's response.

"He's a madman at the best of times," Theo said to his girlfriend at the time, Hypatia Trek, once in their shared studio apartment in Chinatown. "He needs to be lied to for his own good," he said. "I mean, certifiable absolutely. He believes in all this shit, all this alternative religion shit. He thinks there are spirits and goblins with you at all times watching you from a corner of the room."

The spiritual devotion that Tony evinced sprung from his paranoia. And vice-versa. You couldn't separate the mania from the God-hunger and Tony saw no reason to try. He thought it was a package deal. He thought there was nothing that occurred without good cause. But just because demons were real didn't mean a man was obliged to succumb to them. They could curse you and you could banish them. He thought it was an obligation of a Son of Light (his own name for his affiliation) to battle a Son of Darkness. These motherfuckers at the brewery had crossed the Rubicon when they decided to screw him over. As the day dragged on his fulminating assumed an increasingly mystical bent. He thought of course it all had something to do with his tithing to the Great God Pan. There was a Pan-worshipping society created somewhere in the shadow of Coit Tower. Tony had made the trek over there and received their blessing (or whatever you want call the unguent that reeked of goat dung that they smeared you with there as you kneeled naked at a goat altar and the priest every now and again would walk over to you gently and tug on your pecker as if it was a lever to the Eternal).

As a Son of Light, Tony had no true religious affiliation but to Light. So, he discarded faiths like a fourteen-year-old girl discarded outfits. A good guy was a good guy regardless of the language he spoke. Similarly, evil wore many masks but had one face. The trick was to not back down, to give as well as you got and to emerge triumphant in the end. As the narrative arc of the universe bent toward justice (or some such nonsense). As the white hats always overcame the black hats on the Westerners Tony used to watch religiously Saturday afternoon at double features in his hometown Hannibal, Mo.

At times when he started to look upward to the astral plane, he was an especially scary hombre as testified by the lack of clientele that day at Glass Half Full.

"Even the goddamn Hell's Angels split," Theo said to Hypatia and revived. "It wasn't just the yelling and screaming because they were used to that," he said. "No, it was something else. Something darker and eternal. He seemed possessed almost," he said of Tony. "He seemed to want to stop but couldn't stop if his life depended on it."

Gradually he became fixated less on the beer itself and more on the off-putting watermark on the invoice.

"I mean, who the fuck cares about that, anyway?" Theo Mott said to Hypatia. "It's a meaningless brand that nobody in their right mind would think about for long. Let's say it was a mistake by the stationary company that issued the invoice. I mean, who the fuck cares," Theo said to Hypatia. "You don't, normal people don't, blow something like that up to some big conspiracy against you. I think Tony's certifiable at times," Theo Mott said. "I think at such times he's lucky that a cop's not around. I don't know what he could be

busted on, but they would find something. They wouldn't want him to walk around free. I mean, it's more than words, it's a whole vibe. It's like they say how Charles Manson got at times, how he was able to scare even long-time felons into doing what he wanted. There was something evil in him apparently. I hear myself talking and I'm wondering why I'm going through with the investigation. But, then again, I have no choice, right? I need a job. I boxed myself into a corner and this is the only job I can get."

What Theo committed to was driving out the next day with the invoice. What he planned to do was simply request another invoice from the shipper. And once it was presented to him, he would idly mention the watermark's presence.

"They could say something like, 'we've never noticed that before.' Or maybe they would say it was a Carling brand all along. Whatever, I'll get them to say something and tell Tony about it. Of course, it won't be enough to satisfy him but it's something. Maybe I'll just lie and say they admitted the mistake. I'll forge a note of apology or something and mail it to him. And then you know maybe things could return to normal."

Hypatia Trek was a stripper who moonlighted as an archeologist. Immediately she had made the watermark for a Viking symbol.

"Chaos, the End of Everything," she said tracing the mark with one lacquered nail. "See, it's two realms coming together and overlapping. The arcs intersect but they do not sync. Ultimately, they're half-circles which means they're constantly in flux. As heaven and hell, life and death are constantly in flux. They can be pulled apart, but they can never be brought together. So, it's an eternal state of war. I think. Something like that. My specialty at Berkeley as you know was Mesoamerican fertility rites. I left

the sword and sorcery shit to the boys. I took the classes, but I didn't pay attention."

Knowing enough not to ask how she could be so sure about such a cryptic matter, Theo Mott queried about what next.

"What next?" Hypatia said. "Whaddya mean, what next?"

"Why is it there?" he asked her. "What sort of message is trying to be sent?"

Hypatia Trek was an archeologist whose unconventional methods unearthed meaning in cultural waste. In Belize once on a dig she would find, say, a pottery shard with pictograms on its side that indicated water nearby and assume the pictograms were a specific set of directions. The native who made the pottery likely had added the pictograms as decoration, but Hypatia thought otherwise. She imagined herself as the bearer of the light of true science. She took her light into the history's darkest caves and described what she saw. To her, universal chaos meant universal chaos. She didn't know why somebody had taken the time to create the cryptic watermark. It wasn't her specialty ascertaining the "why" of something. She supposed the watermark's creator had his reasons.

Perhaps somebody had stolen that symbol without regard for what it meant. They thought it looked cool or something and so they used it. Hypatia didn't speculate because it was none of her business. She thought that human-created meanings varied from moment to moment. From an archeological perspective the why of human activity was not important, only the what.

Meanings existed between things not in them, Hypatia Trek told Theo quoting Norman O. Brown. On the other hand, perhaps a bit of gaslighting was ongoing.

"Your boss might have pissed someone off at some point," she said to Theo. "And here you have a demonstration of subtle psychological torture. Somebody in the beer supply chain knew he was into magical nonsense," she said, "and here you see the result. They're just messing with him. As likely he had proven himself a pain in the ass to them. You'll get there and they'll admit this was what happened. And they'll laugh in your face for having come all the way out here and that'll be the end of it. Theo, feel free to seek revenge anyway that you know how. Feel free also to not tell Tony this was the case," Hypatia Trek said. "Tony believes he can do no wrong," she said. Eventually he'll fly off the handle maybe seeking revenge. He's a bad seed in my opinion. I don't think you owe him as much as you think," she told him.

This might have been so. Because Theo Mott had plans that went beyond being a dive bar bartender. He had no idea how he would break the news to Tony Godspeed that he was quitting when the time came. He suspected a pernicious one-way dependency was forming in their relationship. When Theo quit Tony would make a scene. At which point Theo would have to explain to Tony that meaning existed between things not in them.

Hypatia Trek was seldom wrong on such matters. Not that it ever came up so much between them. The meaning of ancient symbols seemed to her second nature. Staring at them and interpreting them seemed to her like reading the newspaper

"Modesto. You ever been?" he asked her reclining next to her on the room's Murphy bed. She was in the midst of limbering up subsequent to her night shift.

"I grew up in Modesto," Hypatia told him.

“Any interesting sights?” he asked. “That is, outside the odd dust vortex that blows in from downtown?”

Hypatia Trek told Theo Mott that Modesto was the honey capital of California.

“The beekeepers have tours,” she said. “And there’s free honey at the end of it.”

He might well stay the full day in Modesto if he should be delayed at the brewery, he told her. As the jalopy he drove had no functional headlights.

“Say hello to some folks on my behalf if you do,” she told him. And then neglected to say who exactly Theo should say hello to. She had family, he supposed, somewhere in the area. She neglected to reveal their address, however. Perhaps she thought he would seek them out himself. If so, she was kidding herself. They were on the outs in their relationship. He barely had time to talk to her nowadays let alone scope out her kin.

If she had given the address to her parents, he wouldn’t have shown up. Not without her in tow. He found her an increasing stranger and not somebody to engage with directly. She was there to torture of late, not embrace. He felt she was linked to his dark imaginings. Theo Mott had brought back a case of PTSD from in-country. All the nightmares and flashbacks he had somehow attributed to her. It was deeply unfair and unshakeable. He didn’t understand how this could be.

The next day he drove to what passed for Modesto’s downtown. In so doing, Theo Mott found himself in no shortage of conversation partners. Constantly people were coming up to him to greet him as a long-lost brother. They thought they all knew him from somewhere, but they were wrong. They all focused on what they saw as his familiar face. They told him they thought he went to high

school with them. They told him he was one of them, but nothing could be further from the truth.

He had never been to the Central Valley. Modesto and the people who approached him were entirely unknown to him.

"Maybe there was somebody else here, a look-alike who just happened to live here," Theo said when calling Hypatia Trek from a pay phone in a downtown laundromat. "I assume that's what you were saying to me," he said to her, "when you said say hello on my behalf. You knew this person yourself, didn't you Hy?" he asked. "He was popular in town I'm assuming. And you also knew that he didn't live in town anymore and that I would be mistaken for him."

Once he had finished the pay phone's static was the only reply being transmitted.

"You're mostly wrong on that, dear," Hypatia Trek told him and then hung up. For Theo, this rude kiss off was the final straw. He thought he would come back the next morning and break it off with her. He thought he had earned the right to do so given all the shit she had given him over the years. He would tell her something to the effect that she had become closed off and cold. He would tell her that he was sick of her game playing and rudeness. He would tell her to pack her things and go.

Theo thought it best that this should occur. It was so weird at work nowadays that he had no desire to have it also be weird at home. He might get a dog for companionship eventually. But there was definitely something weird about Hypatia Trek beyond her exotic degree and profession. She had always seemed like a spy to him rather than a lover. He had learned not to confide in her about very much bar related. She had seemed to have it in for Tony Godspeed in particular.

Having folded the invoice into fourths and kept in for the past few days in his blue jeans front pocket, this document he realized as safe from Hypatia's corrupting influence.

"Yes, it's one of ours," said the distillery's customer service representative, Martin Grief, when viewing the invoice through the prism of a small microscope that he kept on his desk, presumably just for such occasions.

A product of the late nineteenth century, the microscope was more an object d'art seemingly than some manner of reading aid. If Mr. Grief was suffering nearsightedness, Theo didn't understand why he hadn't bought a pair of glasses. He might have been wearing contacts but if so the prescription was far too weak. Maybe there was a special lens in the instrument that illuminated secret writing like a UV forensics lamp would do to a stained bedsheet. A magnifying glass might well have served the purpose better. But this was what Martin used. Theo thought he was showing off. He had no idea what he was staring at fiddling with the zoom control on the microscope's side.

Once he admitted ownership of the invoice, it didn't matter so much the device Martin used to magnify it with.

"Glad we can work this out," Theo said to Martin suddenly realizing that it hadn't been his plan to show the invoice to him. Before Theo had a chance to claim he lost it, Martin Grief was taking the paper from him. He thought he should protest, but it was already too late. Now he was in Martin Grief's hands entirely. If he had told Theo to forget the whole thing he would have been forced to do so seemingly. He had lost control of the investigation before it started. He blamed the failure on Hypatia Trek. He would break up with her officially before he consulted Tony about the invoice. This was not like

him hardly. He was usually a lot cooler and supple while bullshitting an authority figure. Such an activity was in his wheelhouse. He didn't understand how easily he had been put off his game.

As the invoice had the distributor's address printed on it prominently, it didn't seem that the invoice's origin was much in dispute. This was not what Theo had asked Martin Grief after locating him in the maze of desks that comprised the distributor's front office. He wanted the watermark explained to him, rather. He wanted an explanation to take home to Tony Godspeed even if the sum of the explanation was that it was an inexplicable mistake.

Maybe this was what the purpose of the gold-plated microscope. It had a special lens on it that was able to identify such arcane marks. Martin Grief would see a particular pattern in the gray ink and divine its nature immediately. He was an expert in such matters. Theo's invoice was Martin's fifth of the day offered for his inspection. He was a detection machine. He never made mistakes on matters like these.

From the first instant since Theo had met him, Martin Grief wore the serious look of an expert. He seemed to have taken the measure of Theo Mott before Theo introduced himself. He seemed to know exactly why Theo was here. This was before Theo could start the cock and bull story about the lost invoice.

According to Martin Grief, the symbol meant chaos. It was just as Hypatia had prophesized.

"But it's the kind of chaos we are interested in here," Martin said adjusting the telescope slightly.

Kinds? Theo didn't know there were kinds of chaos. He thought it was a Boolean value rather, like an ON/OFF light switch.

According to Martin Grief, there were brands of celestial and earthly chaos to endure. This symbol represented the celestial kind.

"It's like two rams with horns locked in place," he said of the watermark. "Each side of the construct vies for dominion over the other," he said. "Eventually one will hold sway. But not until something breaks. It's a chaos that's not self-sustaining," he said. "And maybe that's the message that's being broadcast."

Martin told Theo that different watermarks were for different customers depending on their level of spiritual awareness.

"Nothing is spoken of in this instance, but nothing corresponds independent of will," he said to Theo. "That is, it's not an accident we're looking at. The symbols appear to those worthy enough to divine their meaning. It was always intended for one person. It is not a public utterance up for debate. It is absolutely real for the person to whom the meaning is intended."

When Theo asked who it was sending the message to the bar, Martin Grief demurred.

"It's not a *who* so much as a *why*," he said finally.

This made no sense. Theo Mott said as much to Martin Grief.

"When faced with an illogical situation," Martin said, "it makes sense to seek an illogical answer. Magic, that is. It's a depersonalized force, I gather. Just a *why* in absence of a *what*. It's a mystical Jetstream that some individuals (and some alien races) have managed to tap into. But when one touches a magical force," he said, "one becomes a thing of magic for good. You lose your personhood, even though a shell of your former self might surround you. So, it's no good searching for personal motives. Nobody held under magical

influence is responsible for his or her actions. For all you know you are under magic's sway right now. You believe you choose to be here, but you are wrong. It's an explanation in search of a cause. It finally makes no sense to anyone at all."

Martin thought that soon enough whatever intention this supernatural force had for Theo would make itself known to him. If only to gloat it would make itself known eventually.

Theo Mott thought this was an unsatisfactory explanation.

"I'm asking about your company," he said to Mr. Grief, while pointing at the corporate hell-scape. "I'm asking what your relationship to all this is. I'm asking for something to take home to my boss."

Martin Grief said that all products nowadays coming out of Modesto were subject to magical forces.

This company was only one of many who had to field such complaints. The symbols to which Theo was alluding would appear out of nothing on Hoover vacuum cleaners, on steam flat irons, and on the bottoms of mainframe computers all of which were Modesto products. Most people didn't give them the time of day. They believed it was an industry mark, for example. Only the truly obsessive would drive out here to investigate. For these there was no satisfactory information possible. Better to make up a story about a printer gone rogue than tell the truth. People longed for the truth often as an antidote for not getting an explanation of the Real.

It was impossible to find the underlying cause of a magical occurrence. It was paradoxical in most situations. In this situation, however, it was an obvious fact.

Perhaps, Grief told Theo, he should look around Modesto and see for himself if he was disbelieving. In addition to Modesto's nexus as a center of magic

(for what reason even an adept such as Martin couldn't say), it had several fine attractions to peruse. At least this was the way it had always been explained to him.

When the invoice was returned, Theo Mott looked back at the gold microscope.

"Any place special you have in mind?" he asked him.

Haim's Bee Ranch over on Route 90 was the place Martin Grief said where so many people around here went for a thrill.

"Why?" said Theo. "Is there an amusement park set up there with a bee theme?"

Martin Grief shook his head. "Because it's haunted," he told him. "Supposedly. Because they're still digging up dead bodies after the fact. And nobody can see how or why."

II.

Theo had a cup of coffee at the nearby Bob's Big Boy. There, he looked around for an evening paper. After talking to Hypatia that morning he was in no hurry to return home. He could find a bar and have a few and at worst sleep in his car and return the next morning. This wasn't exactly a glamorous vacation, and Modesto, CA wasn't exactly a glamorous vacation spot. There was a vague starchy odor to the town that Theo assumed as residue from one of the agri-processing facilities on the town's outskirts. He assumed a motel here, the type that he could afford, would be just as uncomfortable as sleeping in his car. Maybe bees had it better than people in this area. Maybe they were the apex predator in the Central Valley and the people cow-towed to them. That might have been one of the few rational explanations for the vibe Modesto gave Theo. Somebody in this village was

free of care, he supposed. But it sure wasn't the people in his line of sight. A lot of sour looks were shot Theo's way in and out of the Big Boy.

This was beyond small town paranoia. The yokels might well have made him for somebody else entirely. It was just as Hypatia Trek had prophesized.

Earlier that morning the Modesto vibe was different. Back then they were at least happy to see him. Something had changed when the sun set. Now every meeting was fraught. He didn't even make eye contact with his waitress as her tone suggested that she was on the verge of throwing a punch at someone.

After paying his bill, Theo Mott walked around what passed for a downtown. Past sunset he drove out to the state freeway where a gas station attendant had told him the Haim Ranch was located.

"You see all the strangeness and try and think about what it means to you, try and search your memory as to what it means for you to be alive. Probably nothing, if memory can be trusted. Without the shared past you're condemned to live in the present. And that's an animal existence devoid of dignity."

These words came unprompted from a bearded itinerant, Silas Braintree, who Theo found camping on the road's shoulder just off the Haim Ranch's entryway.

According to Silas, here in distillation was what had happened at the Haim Ranch. The fact that bees and wasps existed as distinct creatures was, according to most taxonomies, unimpeachably true. But suddenly at this ranch there was no difference between bees and wasps. Or it was a trivial difference, consistently fluid, as was the difference between being happy and sad.

The reality within the ranch's confines was a subjective state in other words, wholly divorced from God's Plan. Silas Braintree, who was once a professor of philosophy at Occidental College in Los Angeles, thought this a deleterious state of affairs. He thought the world as we knew it was ending. He thought this was the first bit of unravelling of reality and it would continue apace until nothing of it was left.

Reality was always fragile and constantly subject to denigration by exterior forces. In a way it was a wonder why it was still here. Silas thought it had survived due only to good will and dumb luck. He thought once it decayed even slightly the process of decay would be unstoppable. He thought it was obvious that this was so.

He was out here was to bear witness to the Great Change when it occurred.

"I'm still an optimist against all empirical evidence," he said to Theo, revealing a row of blackened choppers in the process. Apparently being a prophet of despair did not sit well in matters concerning personal upkeep. The black teeth seemed a gruesome detail, but one in keeping with Silas' stated obsession. Why would somebody who believed reality was dying be distracted even slightly by dental hygiene? That person would have bigger fish to fry, huge intellectual and emotional hurdles to overcome if he should make it through another week intact. To Theo Mott, it was objective proof that Silas was the person he claimed to be. He found the mouth rot compelling as a type of spiritual brand (Prophet's Mouth). Others wouldn't have been so circumspect in their judgment of Silas. But events over the past few days had convinced Theo that Silas Braintree was on to something. Modesto was all too weird and growing weirder daily. He thought something along the lines Silas had described had

to be true. He thought five months, six months from now he might not even know his own goddamned name.

He would have a name according to somebody else but his real name would be forever obscured from memory. Who knew but maybe it had already happened. Maybe he was someone else or had been someone else. He had been thrown into this life at some indiscernible moment. He was starting to think this scenario was not only possible but plausible. Ever since that day in Tony's bar, this sense of displacement had been with Theo Mott. He was laboring in a dream without end. So many commonplace things seemed strange to him suddenly, so many inviting women seemed wicked to him suddenly. Far from disproving Tony Godspeed's paranoia, here he was in the middle of nowhere validating it.

To Theo Mott, Silas Braintree was a completely authentic figure.

"I thought I would stay out here until something happened," Silas said to Theo. He was a pilgrim in search of dark revelation. As with other dark pilgrims, he assumed his zealotry would be rewarded eventually. He assumed the mysterious forces of the universe espied him as he espied them. This was patently absurd, but he couldn't shake himself of the feeling, try as he might. To them he might as well have been inanimate. He was more like a shadow than any sort of flesh and blood creation.

Basically, he had been sitting out here for the past four months to see if that recognition was soon coming. He had no idea what form it would take once it had.

"Nobody would consider me, just another hairless monkey amongst billions, worthy of praise," Silas Braintree told Theo sitting up from his portable

cot. "But maybe a little direction would be nice. If they want me to build a church in their honor, for example, I could build a church in their honor. Surely, they would need some earthly representative to serve their will," Silas said. "I mean, even the three-O God of Abraham requires an earth-bound mouthpiece from time to time. If God wanted something from humanity, He was at least obliged to spell it out. But to do this He would at least need somebody who is aware of His presence," he said. "That is how I know that I have been chosen," he said to Theo Mott. "Ordinary reason would tell you which this is so," he said. "Consciousness serves will and not the other way around. That is to say, where there is a perceiver there is a will to perceive. And even magic requires the will of a magician to focus it. I think. Therefore, I am subject to another's will. I assume eventually it will be made clear to me if only in a negative way."

Lightning could strike Silas dead for example at any second from a clear sky. At which point he would be dead but at least in the tenths of seconds he remained alive he would be satisfied. To him curiosity was all. Silas was above all an intellectual. He was deeply skeptical of magic when he started to investigate via newspaper reports the miracle of wasps into bees. But rather than abate, the mystery increased exponentially. Soon it was all he could cogitate upon. And soon enough he found himself at the Haim Ranch praying for miracles.

The little pup tent he had set up in the ditch was vital but cramped.

"Surprised that there are no cops around to roust me out of here," he said to Theo Mott. "I mean, anybody can see me from the road," he said. "The migrants around here the cops don't treat so well when they see 'em out of the camps," he said. "At the very least I would have expected a flashlight

shining in my eyes at four in the morning. In fact, I would have expected it within two days of my arrival."

Silas hypothesized that the cops were as scared of the bee ranch as the locals were.

"They don't want to get into something they can't handle if only because it will make them look bad," Silas Braintree told Theo. "I mean, they have a reputation to uphold locally," he said. "They don't want to be forced to run away into the darkness terrified. If only because the migrants will see it and become that much harder to roust. Out here Prevailing Authority rules by fear. They don't take to undesirables well. The migrants, the Mexicans, are more or less animals, to them."

Even if he got his ass whipped by the aforementioned bull-necked peace officers, Silas would circle back and camp nearby though in a less conspicuous spot. There was no Christian Fundamentalist nor Salafist alive who could equal Silas Braintree's God-hunger. It was a strange sentiment coming from a professor, who for over a decade had been trained in the skeptical tradition of the West. But now he was a Believer. And this meant he must open his heart not to one type of belief but to all of them. The dam of his rationality had cracked only slightly but complete failure was the result. Devoid of a vision to obsess over, he was still centered enough to wonder how come. He supposed skepticism was a building up of intellectual infrastructure, whereas faith involved tearing it down. He was stricken with love and awe for a Higher Power. There was nothing that could be done except to see the pilgrimage through. He would rather die a martyr than survive in apostacy. The sentiment was so strange once sprung from his sharp intellect. In the worst of times, he felt demon-possessed. He felt he was owed an explanation for

the suffering his faith had granted him. He had no doubt the explanation would come too late to provide much comfort to him. He felt stricken with something, as if he was dying by slow degrees. He felt it was an effect of his martyrdom. He felt there was nothing he could do to stop his inexorable decline first into madness then damnation.

Despite such a gloomy outlook, Silas Braintree was touchingly hospitable to Theo.

"Got one kebob left," he told Theo pointing to the Styrofoam container given to him at the gyro house several hours previous. Theo was starved so he took the offered stick gratefully. He wondered what there was to see at the Ranch and thought to contract Silas as a tour guide. He wanted to see the exact place where it had all taken place, where the bee became a wasp (or what have you). There were supposed to have been murders taken place and Theo wanted to see the place where these occurred. He was wondering if the blood was still on the floor. He was wondering if dead insects had been scattered around the property and ossified.

He had driven all the way out here for a looksee.

"Is it dangerous to go inside?" he asked Silas. He asked because Silas Braintree seemed resolved not to cross the property line.

Silas told him it was doubtless dangerous. But not in the way Theo imagined it.

"It's a zone of magic," he told him. "Where the laws of causality and physics do not apply. You could enter one way and come out the other and not know the difference. Things change and times change," he said. "The Lord of the World, the Veiled Christ, said as much to us in his Sermon of the Gash, *Lazarus 3:1-21*. He said that a blue bird could become a red bird, and the difference would be unknown even to the bird. He said that the world

was not a single story but a series of random stories from which a single story is finally derived.”

Silas’ former colleague at Occidental, Professor Cy Horvath, for example, had once gone in and never re-emerged. That is, he emerged as somebody entirely different from his former self. He became part of the story rather than a passive observer of it. He admitted as much to Silas the last time he saw him. According to Silas, this was about three hundred yards up the road in that direction. He pointed westward with an empty kabob stick.

At this Theo became wary but not fully dissuaded.

“What changes should I expect?” he asked him. “Physical changes?”

“Yes, there can be some physical changes,” Silas Braintree said. As such had been the case with Cy Horvath.

Then wondered if it was worth it. He was going to ask Silas if he would actually remember him once he was inside. Or the reason he had come to Modesto to begin with.

Silas Braintree told him that the ranch affected different people in different ways. As it had affected Theo’s girlfriend, Hypatia Trek, in a way different than any of those he had seen enter inside.

“How do you know about Hypatia?” Theo asked Silas. “How do you know that she and I are together?”

Silas Braintree popped open a canister of Carling Black Label before answering. “She told me,” he said.

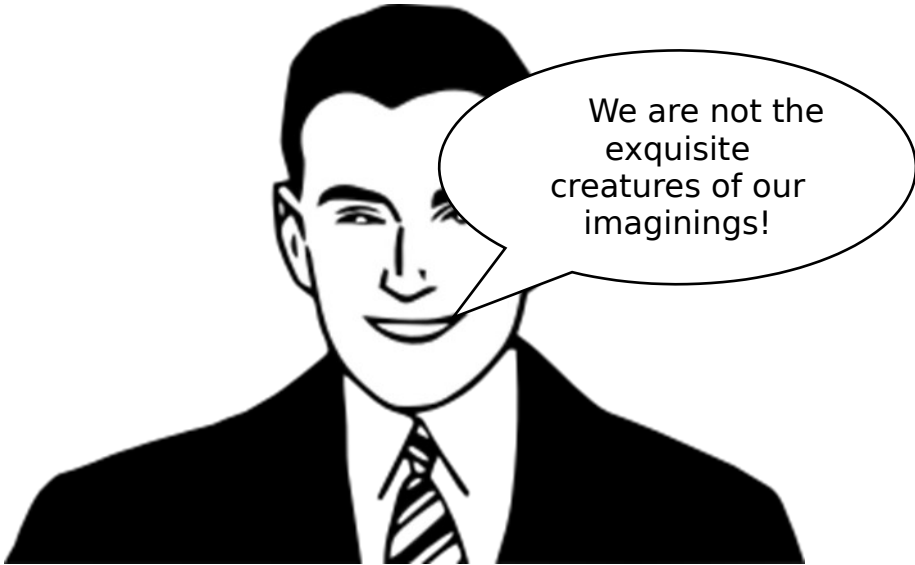
“She told you,” Theo said. “When did she tell you?”

Silas told Theo that in such a place as this it was absurd to discuss “when.” But regardless he thought it was sometime last week.

"Last week? That was right around the time the invoice was sent."

"She told me you will come here asking after this place. And that when you do, I should hand you this."

Silas reached into his pocket and produced a plastic card that had been laminated on both sides. At the top of the card was the issuing agency the New York Institute of the Deaf:



Theo Mott resolved to have it out with Hypatia Trek up when he returned to San Francisco. Once there he would punch her in the face. Hard.

He stowed the card in his back pocket and moved past Silas onto the ranch driveway. And then he walked inside.

III.

At night, when illuminated only by the flashlight Silas had belatedly tossed Theo when he was five feet in, everything appeared as it should be.

That is, it appeared dreadful and foreboding. This was an abandoned rural property that Theo Mott was amid. It was also the scene of an unsolved murder.

It wasn't supposed to be beautiful and comforting. It had a musty smell to it and the entirety of its surfaces, both natural and man-made, were covered with a damp residue. In the ranch house kitchen even the Formica countertop had the feel of something once alive, like the shell of a fossilized tortoise on the verge of re-animation. Everything here was dead but not so dead that Theo was unwilling to believe that everything might at some point come back to life in an instant.

A hundred or so wasp carcasses were allayed on the countertop. They were still on their legs as if they were about to take flight. In Theo Mott's reckoning this couldn't have been natural. Somebody at some point must have entered the facility positioned the carcasses in this way. As if they were toy soldiers.

"Fucking surreal," Theo said to himself then dared to touch one of the wasps. He quickly moved his hand away as it toppled over onto its side. It was dead but to stare at it even for an instant was to believe that it might take flight. Its stinger was perpetually distended and red at the base as if blood had been circulating through it. Theo thought it a creature of pure mendacity (though he realized this was a human-centered generalization). He didn't know how it could still be here, how long ago it had expired, and why rottenness had not set in. Its presence alone was uncanny. It was a sentinel of some type. It belonged here far more than Theo Mott belonged here. It was at peace while Theo Mott was in a gathering state of unease.

The kitchen's lone window overlooked the highway and Silas Braintree's vigil.

"It's fucking weirder than I thought it would be," Theo yelled out to Silas past the slightly opened windowpane. Though less than thirty yards away, Silas hadn't heard him. Perhaps he was ignoring him, perhaps on principle.

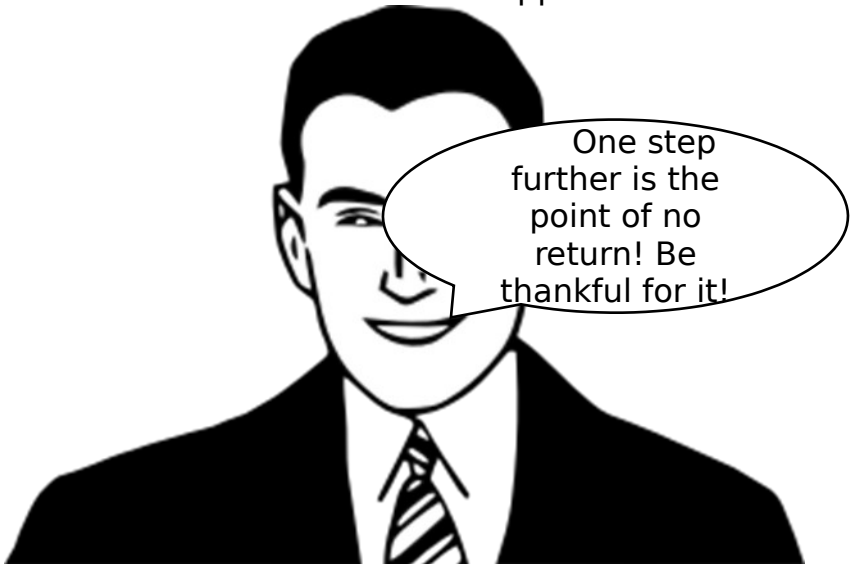
Well, fuck him anyway. Theo Mott thought this while closing the window. At least Theo had the courage of his convictions. He had it enough to stick his head in the lion's mouth. He was still alive (at least as far as he knew). Except for the slight disgust he didn't feel so bad. He imagined he would stroll back onto the highway shoulder minutes later and have a dull story to tell Silas. He imagined meeting nothing but animal decay out inside the house and perhaps a human bone or two.

He didn't know how long wasp colonies lived for or what their migratory patterns were. He assumed at some point he would encounter live wasp specimens and was prepared to run if he had. Such creatures might have constituted the source of the talk of ghosts and haunted apparitions at the ranch. Everything else seemed in keeping with what might have been expected in an abandoned bee ranch. There was a lot of overgrowth outside that was encroaching on the few human structures present. As viewed through the corridor of light that his flashlight created, many of the bee hives had half disappeared into patches of thistle. It had been several decades since Sam Haim last occupied the house. In another two years everything but the skeleton of the house might have been subsumed by the overgrowth.

Maybe Theo would return in broad daylight and look around just to prove a point. Perhaps by then somebody would have bought the ranch. Then all evidence of its former occupant would have vanished. If this was the case, Theo would knock on the door and announce himself as a county

inspector. He would want to take samples from the property of various animal remains, in particular wasp remains, that he would find.

A great deal of information would be gained through such snooping. He would be sure and print up a card of the sort Hypatia had given to Silas to give to the new ranch owner. Arbitrary as it was such documentation lent an authoritative presence to its possessor. Perhaps showing it to somebody would forestall any problems concerning a doubting of his authority. That's the way people were. They expected their overseers to be in possession of documentation. Maybe a person would look back on a given encounter and find that they had been hoodwinked. But just then a badge or a card flashed in somebody's face was all the proof required. A man would hand somebody a card and they would read it. And their perception would be re-oriented completely along the lines of what the card said and instructed. Theo Mott had seen it happen several times. Once or twice even it had happened to him:



Holding the card up to the flashlight, he could have sworn it had said something different minutes

before. But surely this was a mistake of perception, not evidence of a syphilis-plagued God going insane by degrees. Theo thought himself lucky to be alive for some reason. He was filled with an unearned sense of well-being.

Another hundred yards up the highway on which the ranch was situated, a large tear in the earth appeared with a makeshift rope ladder leading down into the gash.

It was never a question for Theo if he should descend. Placing the flashlight in his beltloop he delicately began to climb down.

Once he descended to the bottom, he was a new man. Nothing ever stayed the same for long, did it? Theo thought this was both self-evident and depressing. He thought that the new man inside of him might agree.

Epilogue: Now I Believe

I.

[Ed. The following are notes describing a recording session in Chicago 1927 for the Deacon L. J. Bates. Mr. Arthur Laibly acted as producer. The recorded song was a Deacon Bates original called "See That My Grave is Kept Clean."]

A black cat had recently infiltrated the recording studio at Paramount Records corner of 47th and Michigan Avenue.

"Leave him alone, he ain't hurting no one," sales manager Art Laibly said to the engineer from Western Electric, Phil Sane, of the cat. Art grabbed a cigarette and lit up. He smoked Abdulla solely nowadays, the superb cigarette. Abdulla was a Turkish product supposedly though the package indicated a distributor in Montreal. It had a dung-like aftertaste but a body that put Art in mind of the bazar. It gave him a feeling of sophistication that a run of the mill Lucky Strike did not. Art's wife said it made him smell like the bottom of a hog pen. Well, he surely didn't know what she meant by this. He

surely didn't know from hog pens and their attendant scents. Not any more at least.

He was a sophisticated man, a trend setter at the least, and at most Chicago royalty. He had thus far in 1927 produced nine of Paramount's ten bestsellers. He had a golden ear supposedly to judge by the promotional material. They mentioned him more than they mentioned the artist. The material stated *An Arthur Laibly Production* just beneath the artist's name but in slightly bigger type. They contained his meandering signature at the bottom of every testimonial.

At a dollar twenty cents a record and a complete production cost of two thousand dollars, Art figured the company would be in the black with one of his hot sellers by the early afternoon on the first day of the release. The artists were paid a hundred dollars a recording and save for the Great Caruso nothing resembling a royalty arrangement existed in the industry. Art thought a vice-presidency at the very least was in the offing due to his efforts. This year his records were going to gross three hundred fifty thousand dollars for Paramount. He thought it incumbent upon the furniture makers in Grafton, Wisconsin to do right by him. He thought Paramount would come to him on their knees soon enough. He had a figure in mind of twelve thousand a year and a Cadillac. Selma, his wife, wanted a new stole. Art would go in fifty-fifty with Paramount on the stole if they were amenable. If not, Selma could wear fox, not ermine.

Art thought: fair's fair. For chrissake, yes it was!

"Understand," he said to Phil, "before me everything was high art snootiness, a bunch of screaming Ities recorded through a megaphone. But look," he said to him, "when was the last time you and yours went to the opera? Let me answer that for you: never. They say it's supposed to be some

religious experience watching Puccini at La Scala. You ask me it's a bunch of hooey. Opera that is, not the experience of religion."

Art finished his Turkish smoke before continuing.

"In opera," he said, "you have a clown, for example, who's sad. Why is he sad? Because his wife two-times him. And why is this? Because he's a damn clown! It's a simple problem with a simple solution, I'd say. But no. We are forced to sit for three hours and watch the drama play out. The Ities scream at each other in the usual way that Ities do. Resultant from which nothing is resolved amicably. The drama is self-generating, in other words. It makes no sense from the canny perspective we born-and-bred Americans uphold. More to the point it plays the common man for a fool. They're supposed to understand the goings on of a foreign race in a foreign language. They're supposed to buy these high-toned records and listen to them uncomprehendingly. Phooey, I say! Because all they really want is sentiment in twelve bars. And maybe a tune they can replicate on the parlor piano later."

Art thought that he was selling them bits of their own childhood dreamlife likely forgotten. These were encoded in popular song.

"They want to remember happiness, but they can't," he told the Western Electric man with the strange shifting eyes. "So, they fall back on a popular song to help them find the way home. There's always a moment or two in every person's life where they experience complete contentment. Usually in childhood," Art said. "They see a moonbeam spilling onto a parquet floor and suddenly everything makes sense to them," he said. "In their mind's eye, the moonbeam is there and always will be," he told Phil. "See? It's a grasping of the Eternal in completely human terms. It's a certification that life is worth living. Music, that is.

For two or three seconds it all makes sense. And there's this boundless joy that arrives as a gift, like a baby in a stork's mouth:"

*Daydreams through fields of
clover, will soon be over,
And happy hours 'mid sunny
flowers will wait another day,
Sweet dreams have just begun,
dear, the day is done, dear,
When skies grow dimmer,
And stars will glimmer along the
starlit way.*

This song, "At Sundown," was on its way to selling two million copies. It was issued by a company other than Paramount.

"The point of it is," Art said to Phil, "there's a push-pull in the lyrics between the way things are and the way folks want them to be. The way folks want them to be is daydreams ambling through a field of clover. But all that ends eventually. And eventually it's dark out and you find yourself alone in a room. And so, you put this record on your phonograph. And then you're back there and the cycle starts anew. It's a goldmine I'm telling you with no bottom! It's an industry without limits as long as the hits keep coming."

In the glass beyond the control room where the ring microphone had been suspended, the black cat was circling as if taken by an invisible longing to sing.

"Lemon don't mind its presence none, obviously," Art said pointing to the large blind man in the chair. He was intently tuning his guitar in preparation of being recorded. And unbeknownst to any of them the cat was circling him as if a gravity-caught comet circling the sun.

If Lemon Jefferson recalled the cat's presence at the moment he wasn't letting on. Silent as the approach of fog, the cat would only make itself known by its smell. And perhaps the mangy creature didn't smell as bad it looked. It wasn't a house cat certainly, not anybody's purring tabby spending its days in front of the hearth or on somebody's lap. A feral creature, Art Laibly thought, likely a permanent inhabitant of a Bronzeville back alley. It fed on the rats likely that were driven out of the nearby stockyards. Likely it had come here by mistake or because it had been driven here by other cats. Whichever, it didn't seem intent on leaving. If it made no noise Art thought, who cared? Of course it was likely rife with fleas. Of course, eventually it would have to be seen to by the building's landlord.

This recording studio on Chicago's south side was a temporary set-up on the part of the Paramount Record Company which was itself a subsidy of the Wisconsin Chair Company headquartered in Port Washington, Wisconsin. The company produced records because it reasoned that the phonographs they sold were required to play them. They sold the records as an enticement to buy the phonographs. They thought of records as a marketing enticement like an oven manufacturer giving out baking powder for each new purchase. They didn't consider themselves to be part of the music business. They certainly didn't know from race music and were prepared to jettison the whole subsidiary should various concerned citizen groups come to them with complaints about its production.

To them the blues was a shade of upholstery. They had set up in Chicago only temporarily as various colored artists associated with the town found the journey all the way to Port Washington objectionable in the extreme. Louis Armstrong for one had refused to record anymore with Paramount

if he had to make the hundred-mile trip to the pressing factory in Grafton again. He wanted to record by day and play at night. Other musicians found it objectionable having to sleep in their cars at night as that area in Wisconsin had no colored accommodations. So, a compromise was struck. This recording studio one year previous had been the warehouse for the haberdasher downstairs. Even now stalactites of homburgs existed in the studio's corners as part of the leasing agreement. They were supposed to give Art twenty-four hours' notice before retrieving them. They were certainly not supposed to approach the studio when the red light above the entrance was on. That light signaled that a recording was in process.

"Lemon, anytime you're ready," Art Laibly said to his bestselling artist through the porthole in the glass and lit one gasper from the other. Chain-smoking this was termed according to Art's wife, Alma, but he thought of it rather as a single act than as a series of them linked together chain-like. The fact of the matter was they didn't put as much tobacco into cigarettes as they used to. Made you smoke 'em one right after the other so you would be forced to go back for more. Art Laibly knew how business worked well enough. He knew a scam when he saw one.

He thought about the purchase of a floor-situated water pipe, a hookah, where he could smoke as much as he wanted ceaselessly. Perhaps Art would put that in his new contract along with the Cadillac. He was sick of always running down the stairs for smokes. This wasn't the safest neighborhood anyway after dark. He was sick of having to nurse a pack when the wax master was being cut. Sane, the Western Electric man, didn't smoke. Art was sick of running down to the

haberdashery and bumming a fag off the salesgirl after promising her free records in recompense.

Lemon Jefferson had tobacco on him but as it tended to interfere with a singer's vocal range Art had banned smoking while in the recording booth.

"I got two working titles on this one here," Art said to Lemon through the porthole, if just to make conversation. Straight backed in his chair, Lemon of late had stopped tuning. He seemed satisfied with the guitar that was held in his hands passively but at the ready as a soldier would hold a rifle. He was staring dead ahead silently in the direction of the control room and it gave Art the creeps. Could a blind man ever be accused of staring? He was convinced that Blind Lemon Jefferson "saw" things. That is, he perceived them. And perhaps his perceptions were interpreted by his brain as vision. Art was half-convinced that Lemon saw at least partially in a conventional way. He could hold three fingers to start a count and Lemon would come in promptly as zero. He thought maybe Lemon was using blindness to elicit pity to allow him to sell more records. If that was so it was alright with Art. But when the Deacon stared straight ahead in this manner it gave Art the creeps. At times like these Lemon seemed lost in mesmeric trance. His face at such times was utterly devoid of expression. As if he left his body, as if the Lord had transported him someplace and he was waiting for a cue to return. Usually, he would return when Art started the countdown. But to do that Sane would have to set the wax master in place. And that had yet to occur.

The first of the two titles to be recorded today was to judge by Lemon's rough handwriting "One Kind Favor." Below it there was a longer title but one, in Art's reckoning, more apropos.

"See that My Grave is Kept Clean," he said just after an exhalation of Turkish smoke and marked it

on the recording sheet. This sheet in turn would be packaged with the master for delivery to the pressing plant in Grafton, Wisconsin. So, whatever the sheet said was whatever the record would be called. They printed the labels in-house and took the title straight off the sheet. Nobody, no white man anyway, had a feeling for this type of music. If the sheet had a misspelling the label would have a misspelling. They all thought, at least in dealing with race records, coons had a funny way with words. If that's the way they wanted a particular word to be spelled and, therefore pronounced, so be it. It was the least the Wisconsin Chair Company could do for its colored artists. Apart from the recording fee nothing was paid to them. Art assumed they all had livelihoods apart from record making that would keep 'em afloat until the next callback came.

"See That My Grave is Kept Clean," was certainly a wordy title for the day. But to judge by the sole time Lemon had played it for him it's what the song should be called.

"We die and are reclaimed," Lemon said to Art Laibly. Through the haze of smoke circling between them he said, "What's left behind us in none of our business. We need help if'n to get our graves clean," he said. "The grave is not for the interred but for those who come to visit. As death is truly a passing on."

Here's a problem that Art Laibly had with the song. It's a spiritual but without any notion of spiritual uplift. The dying man tells his interlocuter, "*Now I believe what the Bible told.*" But he's dead already at that point. In this song the clouds do not part nor does the warmth of Jesus comfort. The body is remanded from sodden deathbed to indifferent void. The Bible's telling in this case describes the pitfall to hell, not the election to

heaven. Which was acceptable in Art's admittedly limited understanding of the subject, but he found it a bit odd.

Lemon, weren't the most cherished of your people's spirituals those in which the sinner is reclaimed?

In this song the reclaiming is done not by Jesus Christ but by the Good Earth itself. The flesh rots off a man's bones and is transformed to nutrients. Then the bones themselves are reclaimed by the grave. They are reduced to the dust of calcium and magnesium and exist for millennia as the coatings of small pebbles and dirt clods. Perhaps a worm will ingest the clod and be driven to the surface by heavy rains. The jay would eat the worm and the fox the jay. But there is no man who has ever looked through a fox's eyes and declared "I am this." So much human information is lost without the intercession of a loving, all-powerful God. He alone can intercede to forestall nature's churn after death. Does He do so? In private moments Art Laibly had his doubts. He was surprised that Blind Lemon Jefferson had his doubts too.

Hailing from somewhere in Texas, Lemon was assumed by Art as connected to some form of Pentecostalism. Thus, he assumed a strictly dogmatic approach concerning the crafting of spiritual lyrics. Death was the Final Reward in the understanding of the charismatic church. Art assumed that they didn't have a high tolerance for apostasy in rural Texas religious circles. And these were the folk that Lemon Jefferson sung to, ministered to, if you wanted to call it that. Colored folk to the best of Paramount Records knowledge, constituted a hundred percent of Blind Lemon Jefferson's audience circa 1927. They marketed his recordings as race records meant for select races. Many colored folk nowadays were deeply religious.

This song "See That My Grave is Kept Clean" was a work of apostasy if ever there was one. Which again was none of Art's business. He readily admitted that he did not know his market as well as he should have. Merely he recorded the songs that artists, black and white, wanted to record. There was nothing close to an A&R Department in 1927. The record was assumed to be a faithful document of the musician's performance. And the musician's performance was by-and-large left up to the musician once a recording session had been booked.

Maybe it was the case that Lemon was in the midst of a crisis of faith. Of course, the relationship Art had with him was entirely professional. You did not ask a man you barely knew if he was in the midst of a spiritual crisis as it was a matter for the man's pastor and perhaps his spouse alone. Art found it strange, however, when music so accurately matched a person's interior life. When the culture surrounding that person seemed intent on trivializing it.

The records Paramount sold were cheap things made to be obsolete in years. So much of the music Art recorded were empty avowals of love. Folks listened to them and then discarded them quickly. Over time, the records hardened to such a brittle consistency they would shatter like glass if dropped on the floor. Eventually they would stop playing and break on the turntable. They were the definition of disposable products. Both artistically and technologically, they were not built to last.

To hear tell by the record-buying public, a Blind Lemon Jefferson record was different.

"You got something other than skirt-chasing on your mind," Art said to Lemon upon hearing him audition months ago in this tiny studio. At the time, the Western Electric equipment was not yet

shipped. Instead, a rather large megaphone was employed that the performer was supposed to yell into. Lemon was a blues shouter but also had a nifty facility on the guitar. The megaphone captured the shout but muddled the picking considerably. The technology had not yet caught up to somebody with Blind Lemon Jefferson's picking ability. Part of this new electromechanical setup was to record Lemon specifically. Art hadn't mentioned his name to the bosses in Port Washington, but the electromechanical setup was created with him in mind. He didn't feel the old mechanical way of recording was doing Blind Lemon Jefferson justice. Art thought the megaphones were better suited to a lot of field hollering and of course the odd Itie screamer who would come this way via New York for a quick payday then quickly hop back on an eastbound train the same day.

The electromechanical setup used a ring-like device the company had termed a *microphone*. Through the device, at least according to Western Electric's literature, the acoustic vibrations that a song produced were to be converted into electric pulses.

"From there, son, we do the rest," Art told Lemon when he was being escorted up the haberdashery's steps this morning. Usually, he came straight from Union Station. But on this occasion he was dropped off by an unmarked car with a white driver. The driver honked and waited for Blind Lemon Jefferson to descend. The driver was unaccustomed to acting as any shine's footman, but Art didn't want trouble for one of his most popular artists. So, he hired the driver. He didn't want Lemon going back to Dallas with nothing to show for it.

Initially he wasn't going to tell Lemon anything about the new electromechanical process as he

genuinely felt it was none of his business. But somehow within ten seconds of sitting down, the deacon asked after the whereabouts of the megaphone.

"Strange how you knew about it without me telling you first," Art said to him as he moved back into the control room. "I mean, not so much as a hand waved in front of your face. But you knew what's there and what's not."

Lemon said he could tell by the sounds in the room. Usually when there's an impediment in front of you there's a muffled tone, he said. Indicating something's between you and the wall.

In fact, the new ring microphone was not supposed to be touched. It was sensitive enough according to Phil Sane that you were not even supposed to breathe on it directly. You were supposed to remain at a perfect distance of six inches away with your head turned at a slight angle.

"I think it's going to capture a better sense of who you are," Art said to Lemon, paraphrasing the Western Electric literature. He figured the new equipment would make things easier for everybody in the long run. He realized perhaps there would be some kinks to work through. This was why Paramount had contracted with Western Electric to bring in its top engineer, Phil Sane. But close observation told Art Laibly he had been bamboozled. This man, Sane, had strange pulsating eyes and a strange twitch. More so, he seemed entirely at sea with the electronic equipment in his possession. It took him ninety minutes to set up the ring mike. And he was still fiddling with his control boxes even now.

There were six black boxes stacked on top of the other next to the recording lathe, with multiple wires running out of each box. The wires were

braided together at the back with inches of electrical tape.

"It's the woman with snakes for hair," Art observed of the control panels' back. Unlettered like all company men, Art couldn't recall the name *Medusa* from this past's somnolent lessons. Of course, this was what it looked like to any casual observer of the early twentieth century. The wires were thick, pitch black, and slightly greasy. Emerging from the boxes they coiled over each other like snakes in a caduceus. Perhaps it was an intentional effect on the part of Western Electric. On the other hand, Art had never met an engineer capable of metaphor. He doubted any of them knew who the Medusa was.

On the front of the control panel were many multi-colored meters.

"It's all gee whiz stuff to me," he said to Phil as he labored. He had no idea what sort of values they measured. As except for the Standard Volume Indicator they were all labeled with cryptic symbols. They might have been Greek letters but, if so, they were letters Art was unfamiliar with. More like Viking symbols than Greek to Art's untutored eye. Of course he might have been wrong about that. Likely a qualified sound engineer would have known their meaning immediately.

The largest and, therefore, the most important of the meters was near the bottom of the stack. It contained a symbol whose meaning Art was ignorant of yet at the same time seeming passingly familiar to him:



"What's it measure, dissonance?" he asked Phil Sane who was busying himself with the imprinting


stylus. Weirdly, even though no recording was ongoing, the dial on the meter was slightly perturbed, jumping up and down between zero and one. Its input was coming from someplace other than the ring microphone. Which to Art was strange as he had been told that the mike was the single audio source. Was there another ring mike Phil had set up somewhere nearby? Perhaps to balance audio levels?

According to Phil Sane, what the meter registered was none of Art Laibly's damn business!

"It's secret stuff, kid, real fizzle-noggin science-level garbage," he said. "Why, Professor Einstein himself would need to be given driving lessons for such an apparatus. Besides, it's proprietary. So, you're kinda out of line even asking."


Seeing that this equipment was bought and paid for by Paramount Records, Art found the response unacceptable. But as they were on the verge of cutting some tracks Art wasn't about to have Phil quit in a huff. Besides he assumed if only to judge by his weird autonomous eyes that he was on the verge of joining Lemon Jefferson in the Great Black Room of the sightless. No need to start trading blows with a cripple even if this one deserved to have his nose bloodied. He thought a stern rebuke to Sane's bosses would suffice. Perhaps this was the way he was with other customers. If so, he would richly deserve a pink slip. Art Laibly lived by the motto that the customer was always right.

When pushed a little farther by Art, Phil finally

admitted to Art that the  meter did not measure ordinary recorded sound so much as the eternal hiss emanating from the other side of the universe.

"See, fella, every sound, every *human* sound that's made produces a corresponding *inhuman* sound," Phil said to Art after bumming a Turkish

gasper from him. He felt Art was owed an explanation, truncated as it might be. In truth, the entirety of the electrical input that the meter measured was not of this earth. It varied according to the profundity, the *spiritual* profundity, that is, of the human input. It was essential, in theological terms, that input. It was a malign force doing its best to dampen down the human voice, to erase it into the universe's infernal, undifferentiated hiss. Such a hiss was the sound of the Void being born. Or of God dying, take your pick. The point was that God, His Spirit anyway, dwelt in the works of men. And when His voice became electrified so too must the Void. It was Yin-Yang thing as far as Phil's limited understanding of the situation went. The Western Electric company was as much in the God-promoting business as the music recording

business. Eventually the value on the  meter would always read zero. But now there would be a certain amount of hiss on the record. Humans lacked the technology, the spiritual and electrical technology that is, to fully dampen the scream of the Void. Lemon Jefferson's voice would rise above the hiss absolutely! But the hiss would remain. Within the hiss words and phrases would form. These were communications from the God That is The Oppressor of This World, according to Phil Sane. It was not intended to inform so much as obliterate information. It was deeply harmful to the Cause of Man, the cause of art so to speak.

Late in the game as this was, Phil nevertheless felt no trepidation in saying all this to Art.

"The contract was signed with the company," he said to Art, "there's nothing you or I can do about it regardless. We just need to make the best record we can here, you and I," he said. "We just need to make sure Blind Lemon Jefferson's art is unleashed

on the cosmos. At which point we have done our job regardless of the record's flaws."

Art Laibly thought it absurd to term a half-literate colored minstrel's spirituals art. He said this to Phil Sane.

"I mean, he's untrained as you or me," he said. "He's no Caruso and does not advertise himself to be."

Phil Sane told Art to listen with his heart, not his head. He then pronounced them ready to record. At this, the needle on the strange meter began to jump noticeably. As if it or the value it measured was conscious of individual intention. As if it was an all-permeating ghost entirely attuned to human desire. Perhaps it was a mere flaw in the recording system that the engineer was attempting to disguise with so much mumbo-jumbo. Art thought even the jigs who bought Lemon's records didn't think of him as any sort of real artist. He gave 'em a down homey feel maybe, those internal migrants that had been transported to the north to work in the plants. Blind Lemon Jefferson couldn't sing and his picking, though accomplished, Art felt to be devoid of real subtlety. For his money Rudy Vallee and the Connecticut Yankees were the real stuff. Oh, not really. In truth, Art didn't care for music at all. At home he usually contended himself listening to a faucet drip. He also was partial to frying bacon and the various tones that hammers make when driving nails.

He was in the wrong business perhaps. Within four years the depression would descend, and Art would be back in the Chair Company showroom up in Port Washington breaking off chair legs to sell as firewood. Lemon Jefferson would have passed on and be survived only by his music. Until the day he died, Art would not see what others saw in his music. But he would claim himself as Blind Lemon


Jefferson's producer. He would claim that every effect on the record was intentional, and he had helped pick Lemon's songs.

When the red light in the stairwell came on Art Laibly began to count five. He stared at Lemon through the control room window and noted his own reflection in his dark spectacles. He thought he looked awful, actually. He thought he should stop smoking or at least quit it with the Turkish cigs as they purportedly were to contain a richer strain of tobacco. This bout of self-reflection had lasted in the countdown from the number three to four. By the number five the stylus had contacted the hard wax master and Lemon Jefferson began to strum. He stared straight ahead of him impassively as the words began to flow out of him into the mike. He seemed entirely indifferent to the proceedings. He seemed almost to not be singing so much as mumbling in his sleep:

*And there's two white horses
following me
And there's two white horses
following me
I got two white horses following
me
Waiting on my burying ground*

*Did you ever hear that coughin'
sound?
Did you ever hear that coughin'
sound?
Did you ever hear that coughin'
sound?
Means another poor boy is
underground*

As Lemon sang these words indeed as Phil

promised the  meter jumped repeatedly into the red.

"It means we got a hit on our hands," Phil would tell Art after the stylus had been removed from the wax master. Then he said, "amongst other things."

Hearing the record's playback up in Grafton a week later, Art Laibly was not so sure.

"What gives with the background hiss?" Art asked the Western Electric man, last name Horvath, having heard it twice over in a private booth. Supposedly this newfangled electromechanical process was supposed to do away with the sonic impurities. In "See that My Grave is Kept Clean" they were more pronounced than ever. Art had to bend an ear to make out Lemon's words. They weren't memorable words, but he had to bend an ear to make the words known. And he assumed this was the case with the record buyer:

*Did you ever hear them church
bells tone?*

*Have you ever hear that church
bells tone?*

*Did you ever hear them church
bells tone?*

*Means another poor boy is dead
and gone*

According to Mr. Horvath the mysterious forces in the universe were conspiring against the lone human voice. This was a dark age. Presently there was more spiritual static than clarity. And you could hear the results.

"Your man in Chicago said the same thing," Art told him. "But it doesn't sound any more plausible now."

He suspected Paramount had been sold defective equipment. He told Horvath he would voice his displeasure to Western Electric if the sound quality didn't improve.

"I'm a gentleman in so many other aspects in my life," he told him. "And between you and me I think the hiss on the record is the greatest part of it. On the other hand," he said, "the customer must be served. I don't think anybody could say the recording process went according to Hoyle in this instance," Art said. "And more to the point: your man Sane is an impudent little dew-dropper. I don't understand how you can measure the hiss but not control it. Or put another way: what was the point of contracting for Sane's services when he was not prepared to do a damn thing to improve the quality?"

The elegant Mr. Horvath didn't have an answer for that one. Thus, he performed the action all corporate flak-catchers performed when bereft of air-tight exoneration. He began to apologize profusely and guaranteed it wouldn't happen again.

Damage already done from Paramount's perspective as they weren't about to drive Lemon back up from Dallas for Take Two. No, here at the Wisconsin Chair Company quality control was designated for loveseats and lounges alone. Their entire record division was viewed as a scam that would in time come crashing down around their ears. It was a rarity even for Art to drive to Grafton to check on the product. But in his case, he was curious to know about the new Process. Like so many other people in the 1920s electricity was a great mystery to him. He didn't understand what it was made of or where it came from. He didn't

understand how it could “convert” noises in the air to invisible energetic impulses. Why couldn’t electricity be seen and held in one’s hands? The entire process reeked of hokum and magic to Art. And if only temporarily it seemed he had been proven right.

Lemon’s megaphone shouting with all its distortions would have seemed a better interface-to-wax than this electric micro-phone. On the other hand, the record hiss that the electricity generated proved supremely hypnotic to Art Laibly. He had never heard anything like it before. He doubted anybody save the Western Electric men had heard anything like it either. Here was noise made not by two physical surfaces coming together by some mysterious intercession with the divine. There were other forces in the universe apart from those that were apprehend-able by sense alone. Electricity in Art’s Laibly’s imagination was a mysterious force wedged between nature and supernature. He thought its products of permanent interest even if in this case it was so much aural waste product. He didn’t understand how it worked and doubted he ever would. Wizards, real wizards, manipulated this force to the detriment of mere mortals. He assumed at some point the force would be wielded in the service of something far more dangerous than light and audio recording. He assumed eventually electricity would be set upon the world in the manner of demons summoned by an evil witch bent on apocalyptic destruction.

More than the hiss on the record was Blind Lemon Jefferson’s voice. To Art he was hearing it for the first time. He felt something dire and epic had been missed by him when he had only heard it a hundred times or so in person:

*Well, there's one kind-a favor I'll
ask of you
Well, there's one kind-a favor I'll
ask of you
There's just one kind favor I'll ask
of you
You can see that my grave is kept
clean*

*And there's two white horses
following me
And there's two white horses
following me
I got two white horses following
me
Waiting on my burying ground*

*Did you ever hear that coughin'
sound?
Did you ever hear that coughin'
sound?
Did you ever hear that coughin'
sound?
Means another poor boy is
underground*

*Did you ever hear them church
bells tone?
Have you ever hear that church
bells tone?
Did you ever hear them church
bells tone?
Means another poor boy is dead
and gone*

*And my heart stopped beating and
my hands turned cold*

*And my heart stopped beating and
my hands turned cold
And my heart stopped beating and
my hands turned cold
Now I believe what the Bible told*

*There's just one last favor I'll ask
of you
And there's one last favor I'll ask
of you
There's just one last favor I'll ask
of you
See that my grave is kept clean*

He drove back to Chicago in the middle of the night and put the record on. When it stopped being relevant for him was when he stopped playing it. At that point he found a pistol that he hid in the liquor cabinet and shot himself in the head. It was eight in the morning and his wife not yet up. When she saw him lying there she wondered what had happened. And then she took one of his Turkish cigarettes off his body and smoked it languidly. She thought of getting her hair done today and travelling to Italy. It took her another hour to realize she was obliged to call the cops.

—THE END—

About the Author

N.A. Hole is the author of *Little Ethiopia*, *Death Trip*, *A Serviceable Villain*, and *Busy Bee*. This is his fourteenth novel.